

Dinner in Cornwall

By the woman known only as "P"

"P" is the woman at the centre of the famous "P vs S and Cornwall County Council" case which has now significantly altered the prospects for transsexual people in employment.

Over dinner in a small restaurant in the heart of Cornwall, just four years ago, I asked my boss whether he had heard of the medical condition called Gender Identity Disorder. We were discussing the renewal of my contract, a year after he'd head-hunted me to become General Manager of a division of his organisation which had lost half of its government funding, had no marketplace, no products and no experience of commercial trading. I put it back on its feet, where it still stands, while all around it other similar organisations closed down.

He looked up questioningly and shook his head. After my explanation, he said that he employed me for my talents and abilities and that he saw no problem in continuing doing that. Are you sure, I asked, since if not, we could part and I could get another job. Yes, he was sure; yes, he still offered a new, much improved contract.

The rest is legal history: the office emptied in my absence, the ban on speaking to my staff, followed by the ban on speaking to clients and the setting of impossible targets. We talked; my union negotiated; and I was dismissed. The post another organisation offered me was withdrawn when my ex-boss told them that I had been an unsatisfactory manager.

Brutal treatment and dishonest dealing: a common experience for many, perhaps most, of us. Now, four years later, Europe says that my boss's actions were illegal and he must live with that knowledge. But how do we live - those who, like myself, had to take a lesser job, in a distant city, far from friends, family and home, in order to survive? I would say, with the poet Rilke, that "We are anyway - do not forget it - entirely in the province of guiltlessness". We are, too, in the province of all minority groups, all those who are made powerless and hurt, all those who survive with courage in the face of loneliness, desperation and pain. Thus, while our daily experience may be that of humiliation and degradation, we nevertheless represent the best impulses of humanity - dignity, integrity and wholeheartedness - which, through our life experience, we invite society to share.

P