A brief history of Arnold Schwarzenegger’s stance on LGBT+ rights: Is the Terminator an ally?

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As Arnold Schwarzenegger delivers a scathing takedown of Donald Trump and the US Capitol riots, it’s easy to paint the Terminator as a liberal hero. But that’s not how many LGBT+ people remember him.

The former actor, bodybuilder and politician has had quite the redemption arc over the years, but in his stint as Republican governor his policies towards the LGBT+ community were definitely a mixed bag.

Now 73-years-old, Arnie is living proof that your views can evolve, just as he evolved from weightlifter to businessman to actor to governor – but does his LGBT+ record stand the test of time?

Arnold Schwarzenegger blocked marriage equality in California

Like many of his generation, Arnold Schwarzenegger was slow to embrace LGBT+ rights. As Republican governor of California he had a mixed stance on the matter, saying in 2004 that he supported gay rights and civil unions – while also telling the state’s attorney general to take “immediate steps” to stop same-sex marriage being passed.

“It’s time for the city of San Francisco to start respecting state law,” he said when then-mayor of San Francisco Gavin Newsom attempted to lift a ban on same-sex marriage.

A year later he stepped in to veto AB 849, a bill to legalise marriage equality. It was a huge blow to the LGBT+ community, yet Schwarzenegger claimed he believed same-sex couples were “entitled to full protection under the law, and should not be discriminated against”.

The very same day he signed the Civil Rights Act of 2005, which prohibited the discrimination on the basis of sex, gender and sexual orientation in public accommodation.

This was just one of the many anti-discrimination laws he passed during his time in office, including bills that granted spousal benefits to LGBT+ partners, protected LGBT+ youth in the juvenile justice system, instituted discrimination training in healthcare and removed bias from sex education programs.

He’s also the reason why Californians celebrate Harvey Milk Day, thanks to a bill he signed requiring the governor to honour the gay political pioneer each year.

Perhaps his biggest achievement was repealing a law that instructed the State Department of Mental Health to conduct research into the “causes and cures” of homosexuality.

He later revealed that his own parents had beaten him and tried to “cure” him of homosexuality, believing that his obsession with male bodybuilders was a sign he was gay.

But Arnold Schwarzenegger was far from a martyr: he also vetoed a lot of pro-equality bills, mocked his opponents as “girlie men” and remained publicly opposed to same-sex marriage throughout his two terms as California’s governor.

Schwarzenegger officiated same-sex weddings
Despite his public opposition to marriage equality, in 2012 Arnold Schwarzenegger revealed to 60 Minutes that he had actually presided over two same-sex weddings while in office, one for his chief of staff, the other for an assistant who worked for him.

That still didn’t mean he supported it, though.

“I, personally, always said that marriage is between a man and a woman,” he said. “But I would never enforce my will on people. If they want to get married, let them get married.”

His tolerant ambivalence came as cold comfort to many viewers, who had not forgotten that, as governor, Schwarzenegger had indeed enforced his will on the Californian LGBT+ community.

Nevertheless, his views noticeably began to shift in the years that followed. By 2015, shortly before the Supreme Court made marriage equality the law of the land, he was openly urging his party to terminate religious freedom laws.

In an article for the Washington Post, he warned that Republicans risked alienating the “next generation of voters” with divisive measures that polarised the country.

Referring to a new religious freedom law in Indiana, he declared: “As an American, I’m incredibly concerned about what happened in Indiana this week and the threat of similar laws being passed in other states. As a Republican, I’m furious.”

Schwarzenegger praised the gay Apple CEO Tim Cook for speaking out against the law and chastised his fellow Republicans who chose “the politics of division over policies that improve the lives of all of us”.

And he famously channelled the Terminator as he hit back at a fan who had a problem with his rainbow-tinted profile picture to celebrate Pride. “Hasta la vista,” he quipped, and the immortal words immediately went viral.

In recent years his socially-liberal leanings have seen him pitted against Trump, with Schwarzenegger bitterly opposing the homophobe-in-chief throughout his presidency. This culminated in a seething video address on Sunday (10 January) in which the former governor compared the US Capitol riots to the Nazi Kristallnacht.

“President Trump is a failed leader. He will go down in history as the worst president ever,” he declared. “The good thing is he soon will be as irrelevant as an old tweet.”

All in all there are many grey areas to Arnold Schwarzenegger’s legacy, and much as we love to see the Terminator take down Trump, it would be unwise to class him as a staunch LGBT+ ally.

But at the very least, his shifting views demonstrate a flexibility and an openness to change, which is more than you can say for certain other Republican septuagenarians whose policies seem stuck firmly in the past.

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