

OUT DIPLOMACY

*Reflections on LGBT service in
the diplomatic bureaucracy.*

LAURA E. DURSO, PH.D. WITH JEFF KREHELY



In the United States in the 1950s, several thousand lesbian and gay civil servants were purged from the federal workforce in what was called the “Lavender Scare”.ⁱ Only until President Clinton’s and President Obama’s Executive Orders banning, respectively, discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in the federal workforce did the fear of losing one’s job for being LGBT begin to lessen.ⁱⁱ President Obama has appointed at least 300 openly LGBT professionals to full-time and advisory positions in the federal workforce.ⁱⁱⁱ These appointments, including six openly gay ambassadors and one special envoy, have led to unprecedented visibility of the LGBT community within the federal government.

In interviews, three of these ambassadors and their staff reflected on how the appointment of openly LGBT officials, particularly in high-visibility roles like ambassadorships, impacted the advancement of LGBT equality at home and abroad. Their observations encompassed changes in the workplace climate for LGBT people, internal policies related to the treatment of LGBT federal employees, and the impact on local LGBT communities in their respective countries.

REPRESENTATION ADVANCES EQUALITY

Overall, those interviewed reported gradual, positive changes in equality for LGBT people over their time in civil service, both in terms of more open dialogue on LGBT rights issues and substantive policy changes that improved the climate for and protection of LGBT people and their families. These changes were said to reflect the social change occurring in the U.S. generally, with increases in public support for LGBT rights. Interviewees all believed that having openly LGBT civil servants and openly gay ambassadors had a significant and positive impact on these changes.

They also noted other mechanisms that drove changes in internal policies and engagement abroad. One of the most significant drivers was the need for recognition of the ambassadors’ partners, who accompanied them to their respective posts. Multiple interviewees discussed past challenges with obtaining visas and benefits for same-sex partners and one stated a belief that there were greater barriers for the spouse than the ambassador, who may have been denied benefits or opportunities to engage with the diplomatic and local communities. The need to address the treatment of same-sex spouses under existing policy was seen as both a practical matter for ambassadors and other civil servants and as a tool to recruit LGBT people into positions within the government. Thus, as much as an openly LGBT person serving as an ambassador or civil servant influenced positive changes in the treatment of LGBT federal employees, the treatment of their same-sex partner and family may have influenced the advancement of equality even further.



Frankly [having openly LGBT ambassadors and civil servants] has forced the issue. It is to the credit of those individuals, including people I have worked with, that they have been willing to be open about it and generate conversation and push these issues within management of the department.”

– Laura Lochman, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in the Kingdom of Denmark

The leadership of gay ambassadors and LGBT civil servants was not the only type of leadership credited with changing the climate and policy landscape for LGBT equality. Interviewees noted that explicit and visible leadership from senior members of the government, including the President, Secretaries of State, and the Ambassador to the UN, set the tone for a commitment to diversity that included LGBT people. Interviewees reflected that these leaders expressly promoted the value of creating a diplomatic corps that was representative of the United States, that would “look like” all of America:

“Continue to appoint openly LGBT people. President Obama said that we want you because of your uniquely American story, which includes being LGBT. Tell that story. That is why this government is going to be more interesting, more American.”

– Rufus Gifford, Ambassador at the U.S. Embassy in the Kingdom of Denmark

“I think it has been really great to have the leadership of the Department of State make so clear that this is our policy. When Sec. Clinton filmed an It Gets Better video, that was very powerful. Having management notices or written policies are fine but to have a very clear expression of support [from leadership] is very important.”

- Susan Sutton, Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Vietnam

Multiple interviewees noted the importance of GLIFFA – an organization formed in 1992 to represent LGBT personnel, their families and allies within foreign affairs offices of the U.S. Government, in significantly influencing the advancement of LGBT rights. The organization provided both a welcoming space for LGBT employees to come together and set a policy agenda to serve LGBT people and their families.

Change was also said to occur as ambassadors and civil servants incorporated LGBT rights issues into the broader human rights agenda of their mission, ensuring that they would be treated equally alongside

other human rights issues. Interviewees stated that promoting policies that supported LGBT people was not done out of a special interest because an ambassador was gay, but because it was the policy of the United States government:

“One of things that has been important is that we are implementing the State Department policies in exactly the same way that they are being implemented at an embassy where there isn’t an LGBT ambassador because the policy is the policy. The Ambassador has said that [LGBT rights] isn’t a special interest – we are not arguing for the advancement of rights because of a personal interest, we are because it is the position of the government. The appointment of openly gay ambassadors is not about having someone with a special interest to advance this particular policy, it is one of the ways we show that we are walking the walk.”

- Susan Sutton

Other validators of LGBT equality were used by embassies to show a commitment to LGBT rights globally, such as engaging other countries’ missions in local events and discussions of LGBT issues to demonstrate broad support. Even with that collective support, one interviewee noted that the influence of the United States is high within the diplomatic community, which prompted more substantive engagement with LGBT issues in-country.

VISIBILITY CREATES CULTURAL CHANGE

Ambassadors and their staff spoke about how culture change, not just policy change, improved the climate for LGBT federal employees. That shift in culture was said to be due in part to the visibility of openly gay ambassadors and other civil servants, who humanized discussions of LGBT issues and provided both government employees and local actors an example of what people were fighting for when advancing equality. In addition, the visibility of the ambassador’s entire family - spouses, children, and extended family – was credited with creating a more positive culture:

“My family – what we look like – that’s a message itself. We can show that families come in all shapes and sizes, and that love is love. This country really values family, and we show that we are in fact a real family. Having my Mom with us a lot helps, too – intergenerational families are hugely important here.”

- Ted Osius, Ambassador to U.S. Embassy in Vietnam

“Given that Ambassador Baer, as an openly gay man, is speaking for the United States and the Obama Administration, it means something to other OSCE countries and their leaders. He makes others realize that LGBT people are real, they’re someone you see every day – they’re people’s son, boss, or husband.”

- Kate Marie Byrnes, U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative and Deputy Chief of the U.S. Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

Being out is imperative.

Policy is part of it but the cultural change matters more I think. Having the legal protections is good but if the culture doesn’t change it doesn’t matter because you won’t feel safe at the workplace. I bet the vast majority of my staff have never had a gay boss and what does that mean for them, especially for people who are coming from less progressive parts of the government? It is just a matter of making people feel comfortable – be yourself, be a regular person and be friendly and be respectful and you earn respect that way. You don’t become a gay ambassador anymore, you become a human being.”

- Rufus Gifford

Having visible examples of LGBT families and an openly gay ambassador was said to promote development of positive relationships with federal employees and local actors who did not have much experience with or exposure to LGBT people or issues.

In addition, visible LGBT leadership at embassies spurred direct engagement with local actors, including increased support of LGBT pride festivals, media appearances, pro-active communication through social media, and development of joint programming in-country. Interviewees also stated that having openly gay ambassadors provided encouragement to local LGBT NGOs, filling a void in places where there were few openly LGBT people in public life.

Finally, being “out” about one’s sexual orientation was said to give ambassadors’ increased credibility and effectiveness when speaking on LGBT and human rights issues. Interviewees noted the link between policy and personnel, stating that having openly gay ambassadors encouraged others within the State Department to engage on issues of equality and were real-life demonstrations that the government was being true to a commitment to human rights.

“The fact that Ambassador Baer is an openly gay man is not lost on anyone, so when he’s speaking on LGBT rights, it gives the discussion fuller meaning. And his being openly gay has made us even more powerful as a delegation.”

- Byrnes

The appointment of LGBT people to high level civil service positions both reveals the progress we have made since the 1950s and accelerates further changes towards equality.

ⁱ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2004).

ⁱⁱ Further Amendment to Executive Order 11478, Equal Employment Opportunity in the Federal Government 98 FR 14689 (May 28, 1998) and The White House, “Executive Order – Further Amendments to Executive Order 11478, Equal Employment Opportunity in the Federal Government, and Executive Order 11246, Equal Employment Opportunity,” Press release, July 21, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/07/21/executive-order-further-amendments-executive-order-11478-equal-employem>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chris Johnson, “White House: Obama to make case for Clinton at D.C. LGBT Event,” *The Washington Blade*, September 27, 2016, available at <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2016/09/27/white-house-obama-to-make-case-for-clinton-at-d-c-lgbt-event/>