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## Senior Tory tells Republicans to embrace gay rights

Nick Herbert, the shadow environment secretary, backs Barack Obama's move to allow gay people to serve openly in the military

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Nick Herbert, the shadow environment secretary. Photograph: Dave Gadd/Allstar

A senior Conservative politician will today tell American Republicans that they should back gay rights because support for homosexual equality is "an essential element of modern conservatism".

Nick Herbert, the shadow environment secretary, will also back Barack Obama's plans to allow gay people to serve openly in the military – a move that is opposed by senior Republicans.

In a speech he is delivering later today at the Cato Institute in Washington, Herbert will tell the Republicans that the Conservatives learned from experience what happened when a party "closes the doors to sections of our society". The Tories have been out of power for 13 years.

Referring to the estimated 3 million gay people in Britain, Herbert will say: "The truth is that there are millions of people who we drove away but who share our values and want to join us."

Herbert, who is gay, will not explicitly criticise the Republicans, the Conservative party's traditional ideological allies in the US. But his remarks are clearly aimed at the US party, which is increasingly under the influence of evangelical Christians and sceptical about gay rights.

This became evident early this month when John McCain, the Republican candidate for president in 2008, criticised Obama's plan to abandon "don't ask, don't tell" – the policy of letting gay people serve in the US military provided that they do not acknowledge that they are gay – and instead to allow them to serve in the forces openly.

McCain said the Obama policy was "risky", even though he appeared to welcome the

idea of changing the rules in 2006.

In his speech, Herbert will explicitly back the Obama plan.

"In the UK we've allowed gays to serve openly in the military for 10 years," he will say.

"To bar people from making the most profound commitment to their nation, or to ask them to live their lives dishonestly by not telling, is something no conservative should support.

"As Israel – hardly a country which goes in for soft defence – has understood, and in the words of Barry Goldwater: 'You don't have to be straight to be in the military; you just have to be able to shoot straight.'"

Herbert will argue that conservatism is not just compatible with the principle of equality between gay and straight people, but that "such equality is in fact an essential element of modern conservatism".

"Conservatives who want people to become better through their own efforts can never stand by while others are denied that chance," he will say.

"Conservatives should always believe that everyone should have an equal chance in life, regardless of any other factors, and that they should not be discriminated against."

Herbert will praise Cameron for the way he has changed the Conservative party by making it more open to gay people and supportive of gay rights.

He will say that a Conservative government would "show leadership" on issues like homophobic abuse in sport and homophobic bullying, although he will not promise new legislation.

"We will also understand where we should give a lead and where there is a need for law," he will say. "Conservatives should never leap to legislate."

He will also criticise Labour for assuming that they own the gay vote.

"In the UK, all three major political parties are now assuring gay people that it's safe to vote for them. Typically, far from taking pleasure in this new consensus, the left has greeted it with dismay," he will say.

"Gay people are not the property of the left, or of any party. They are not an interest group or a political commodity to be traded. They are not vessels for votes. Gay people are motivated by the same issues as any other voter. They will vote for the political party which best sits with their views – so long as that party does not make itself taboo."