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Gay hate wrapped in a Republican embrace

The party once preached tolerance but is now getting ever whiter and straighter

Andrew Sullivan

I had the pleasure of accompanying Nick Herbert, the Tory shadow environment minister, on some of his tour of conservative and Republican circles in Washington last week. I felt bad for him in a way. Not only did he somehow break the bath plug in the British embassy, he was also in favour of action on climate change as a core Tory pledge.

The Republican party doesn't really believe in baths (some super-charged showers do the trick) and it certainly doesn't believe in that "snake-oil science", as Sarah Palin recently called climate change. But the best was yet to come. Herbert came here to give a speech on why conservatism can and should be inclusive of gays and lesbians. The speech he gave was terrific, largely avoided domestic culture-war politics and focused on what he believed the Tories' experience could teach their sister party in the US, today's Republicans.

"I can tell you what happens to a party when it closes the door to sections of our society and is reduced to its core vote," he told the wide-eyed audience at the libertarian Cato Institute. "It's no fun being in opposition for 13 years. And I can tell you what happens when a party opens its doors again and broadens its appeal. A successful political party should be open to all and ought to look something like the country it seeks to govern."

The same week, the most popular conservative activist conference — attended by Mitt Romney and Dick Cheney, among many others — was full of rousing speeches. It is a kind of informal party conference for the grassroots, and takes place early each year in DC. It was, shall we say, an interesting contrast with Herbert's message.

On one panel for the under-thirties, Jason Mattera, a rising conservative star, brought the house down. His new book is called *Obama Zombies: How the Liberal Machine Brainwashed My Generation*, and in his speech, adopting a black accent, he mocked what he called "diversity", including college classes on "what it means to be a feminist new black man. Think of a crossover between RuPaul and Barney Frank". RuPaul is a black drag queen and Barney Frank is the openly gay chairman of the banking committee in the House of Representatives and one of only three openly gay members of Congress (all of whom are Democrats). At the same conference three years ago, Ann Coulter, the bestselling conservative author of her generation, called former vice-presidential candidate John Edwards "a faggot" to rowdy applause.

Since I left the UK a quarter of a century ago as a supporter of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, the gulf between American and British conservatism on this question has never been this wide. There is something of an irony in this. Gay conservatism first found its footing in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s — with the publication of Bruce Bawer's *A Place at the Table* and my own *Virtually Normal*.

The gay left denounced us as "homocons", but the gay and lesbian group Log Cabin Republicans — named after Abraham Lincoln's log cabin — thrived. The push to integrate gays into the military — deemed by the largely leftist gay movement of the 1970s to be a violation of the "rainbow coalition" against the military and war — dominated US politics in 1993, long before it came to pass in Britain.

My own *New Republic* cover story, "A conservative case for gay marriage", which argued along David Cameron lines that commitment and family should be valued among gays as well as straights, was published in America in 1989. In 1996, there were two openly gay Republicans in Congress, three years before Michael Portillo's statement about youthful "homosexual experiences". One of those congressmen, Jim Kolbe, was re-elected to his seat 10 times and addressed the Republican convention in 2000.

The founder of modern American conservatism, Barry Goldwater, who ran for president in 1964, was a passionate supporter of gay rights in the early 1990s. When Bill Clinton botched the question of gays in the military in 1993, Goldwater quipped: "Everyone knows that gays have served honourably in the military since at least the time of

Julius Caesar.” He added: “You don’t have to be straight to be in the military; you just have to be able to shoot straight.”

Perhaps the most telling symbol of the dramatic shift of the Republican party on this question is what happened during the Briggs initiative in California as long ago as 1978. The initiative proposed banning all gay people from being teachers in state schools. It is memorialised in the recent film on Harvey Milk, the gay rights pioneer. Reagan, a former California governor, was about to launch his presidential campaign and needed every evangelical vote he could get. Nonetheless, he opposed the initiative, writing a formal letter explaining why, and a week before the vote wrote an article against it: “Whatever else it is, homosexuality is not a contagious disease like the measles. Prevailing scientific opinion is that an individual’s sexuality is determined at a very early age and that a child’s teachers do not really influence this.” Reagan’s intervention helped shift what was predicted as a landslide victory for the initiative to a landslide defeat. Last month, a poll of more than 2,000 self-identified Republicans asked: “Should openly gay men and women be allowed to teach in [state] schools?” Eight per cent said yes, and 73% said no. Sixty-eight per cent said gay couples should be barred from receiving any state or federal benefits. And this month, Bob McDonnell, the newly elected governor of Virginia, as one of his first acts in office, rescinded a non-discrimination clause protecting government employees from being fired because they are gay.

In all of this, of course, the Republican leadership — and the Christian base of the party — is moving in the opposite direction to the country as a whole. Depending on how you phrase the question, 60-70% now favour allowing gays to serve openly in the military (up from about 40% in 1993); two-thirds favour giving gay couples the same rights and responsibilities as heterosexual couples (up from 40% in 1993); 47% now favour full civil marriage rights (up from 37% in 1993). And in the under-30 generation, 65% favour full marriage equality. In contrast, among all Republicans in a recent Washington Post poll, 69% opposed it.

This is a new kind of Republican party. It is not Goldwater’s Arizona libertarianism or Reagan’s California tolerance. It is getting whiter and whiter, and straighter and straighter. And among the heterosexuals, the hostility towards gay equality is becoming an intense and defining shibboleth of what the party means.

As I said goodbye to Herbert, there was a part of me that wondered why a gay conservative should have emigrated in the first place. But then I went home with my husband. There are some things that transcend politics. And he is one of them.

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