

Andreas Heilmann (2010)

## **Outings in the top league**

### **Being gay in high politics**

On June 10, 2001, the brief statement "Ich bin schwul, und das ist auch gut so" ("I am gay, and that's okay"), made at the regional party conference of Berlin's social democrats, caused a nationwide stir. Their candidate for the office of Governing Mayor, previously barely known Klaus Wowereit, publicized his homosexuality in front of TV cameras and became popular overnight. The phrase has henceforth become his trademark and has shaped the image of the first openly gay head of government of a German state.

The Wowereit case was followed by a cascade of outings of prominent male politicians. Meanwhile, there is hardly a major political party in Germany that doesn't count at least one openly homosexual leading figure in its ranks. A "gay four-leafed clover" – as it was referred to by a well-known German news magazine – is now complete, further including Volker Beck, First Secretary of the Green Party's parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, Ole von Beust (CDU – Christian Democrats), First Mayor of Hamburg, and finally Guido Westerwelle (FDP – Liberal Democrats), the first openly gay Federal Foreign Minister and Vice Chancellor. Around the same time, openly gay politicians also rose to top-level posts in other major European cities, such as the socialist Bertrand Delanoë in Paris or Erling Lae of Norway's Conservative Party in Oslo.

The phenomenon of the "outing cascade" in politics was examined by a research project at the Humboldt University of Berlin. The present sociological analysis sheds light on the coverage the German print media devoted to the outings of four major political figures – Volker Beck, Klaus Wowereit, Ole von Beust, and Guido Westerwelle. The study reveals how those outings changed the public perception of the male image. Furthermore, it elucidates why and under what conditions homosexual masculinity in the political domain is set to become a socially accepted part of normality.

Unlike in the few cases of openly lesbian female politicians, outings among their male colleagues apparently touch upon a special social taboo due to the longstanding perception of male homosexuality as being incompatible with the traditional model of "the statesman" as a cultural representation of masculinity. According to the all too familiar cliché, homosexuality and masculinity are considered to be in open contradiction. The attribute "gay" is thus equivalent to "unmanly." Openly homosexual men were consequently excluded from the male domain of politics for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In this respect, the examined cases of outings during the past decade indicate a fundamental change. They testify to a complex interplay between changing social norms, mass-media stereotyping, and the self-presentation

of politicians. Nowadays, seen as both an expression of exceptional authenticity and a statement of credibility, coming out can serve to upgrade a politician's homosexuality into a symbolic resource, whereas disclosing somebody else's homosexuality no longer provides an effective means of denunciation and is more likely to backfire against the tattletale. A case in point is the (self-)outing of Hamburg's mayor Ole von Beust whose bold confession exposed his coalition partner Ronald Schill as a would-be slanderer and thereby left him branded. Both the von Beust and the Wowereit example indicate that publicly asserting one's own homosexual orientation may yield opportunities to sharpen one's profile and gain prominent recognition within the scope of today's highly personalized politics. As the results of our analysis suggest, the media are increasingly embracing the image of an urbanized, cosmopolitan homosexual statesman that reflects a new normality. New clichés are emerging and changing the traditional images of both homosexual men and male politicians.

Wowereit, Westerwelle, and their fellow politicians of the same disposition are the incarnation of a more flexible masculinity, helping to pry open the straitjacket of traditional masculinity in the political sphere. In the wake of a positively changing sentiment toward gay masculinity, this male image is now even surfacing as the cultural model of the "new type of male politician": a modern, tolerant, and cosmopolitan statesman. However, this new normality is merely granted on probationary terms. Any openly gay politician is acting within the permissible range only as long as he manages to keep his masculinity in a credible distance from femininity. Furthermore, he must present himself as sexually disciplined by living in a stable relationship. "In principle, I am running around looking through the eyes of a yellow press reporter. I often find myself thinking: How might this be turned into a headline?" says Klaus Wowereit in his 2007 autobiography. Once a leading politician has come out, permanent public observation calls for high levels of self-control and media competence in image management.

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