

History Notes: Issue 19

Homosexuality at the Foreign Office 1967–1991

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Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office



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An Introduction to the Documents

The files on which this paper is based are, at the time of writing, part of the FCO archive at Hanslope Park, Milton Keynes. Although personnel files relating to individuals are generally destroyed, many documents which relate specifically to policy have survived. It is from the latter that we are able to piece together the story of FCO policy towards homosexuality from the mid-1960s to the 1990s. This paper is intended as an introduction and accompaniment to the material contained in the files which in due course will be released to The National Archives.

Thanks are due to Fiona Graph and the Retrieval team at Hanslope Park for their indispensable help with locating the files, to FCO Historians, and to Becky Warren for designing the cover.

LGBT Milestones

Britain

Foreign Office

- 1951 Guy Burgess escapes to Moscow after working as a spy for the Soviet Union.**
- 1957 The Wolfenden Committee recommends decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults in private. It is rejected by the government.
- 1958 The Homosexual Law Reform Society is founded to campaign for the legalisation of same-sex relationships in the UK.
- 1962 Naval Attaché John Vassall is arrested and charged with spying for the Soviet Union. It is revealed that his defection was as a result of blackmail after Vassall was photographed having sex with men.**
- 1964 The North Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee (NWHLRC) is established to campaign for homosexual equality.
- 1967 The Sexual Offences Act decriminalises sex between two men in private who are over 21. It would take until 1980 for the Act to apply in Scotland, and until 1982 for it to apply in Northern Ireland.
- 1969 The NWHLRC is expanded into a national organisation and is renamed the Committee for Homosexual Equality (CHE). It changes its name to the Campaign for Homosexuality in 1971, but keeps the acronym CHE.
- 1969 Violent demonstrations by LGBT protestors in response to a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, Manhattan, ignite the gay liberation movement in the USA and around the world.
- 1970 A British counterpart to the American revolutionary political organisation Gay Liberation Front (GLF) is set up in London.
- 1972 The first Pride is held in London and attracts around 2,000 participants. *Gay News*, Britain's first gay newspaper, is founded.
- 1974 Labour's Maureen Colquhoun is outed as the first lesbian MP and is deselected four years later.
- 1977 The CHE calls upon Amnesty International to adopt the issue of international LGBT persecution.

- 1979 Anthony Blunt, an openly gay British art historian and former Foreign Office official, is publicly unmasked as a Soviet spy and stripped of his knighthood.**
- 1981 The first case of AIDS is recorded at Brompton Hospital, London.
- 1984 Chris Smith, a London Labour MP, becomes the first gay male MP to come out.
- 1988 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher introduces Section 28, banning the promotion of homosexuality by schools and local authorities. Stonewall UK is founded in response.
- 1990 Justin Fashanu becomes the first professional footballer to come out as gay. Eight years later he would commit suicide.
- 1991 Conservative Prime Minister John Major announces that, owing to 'changing social attitudes', the ban on gay men and lesbians working for the British Diplomatic Service will be lifted.**
- 1997 Labour's Stephen Twigg and Ben Bradshaw become the first out gay men to be elected as MPs. Angela Eagle becomes the first MP to voluntarily come out as a lesbian.
- 1998 FLAGG, the Foreign Office Lesbian and Gay Group, is formed.**
- 2000 The UK government lifts the ban on gay men and lesbians serving in the armed forces.
- 2004 James Clark becomes the first openly gay man to be appointed Ambassador (to Luxembourg). He and his partner Anthony Stewart become the first officially recognised gay couple to have an audience with HM Queen Elizabeth II.**
- 2005 Christopher Cramp and Matthew Roche become the first same-sex couple to complete a Civil Partnership in the UK, following the Civil Partnership Act 2004.
- 2013 The Marriage Act is passed in England and Wales, allowing same-sex couples to marry.
- 2014 British diplomat Brian Davidson marries his partner Scott Chang at the UK Ambassador's residence in Beijing, China.**
- 2016 Prince William appears on the cover of gay magazine *Attitude*.

Foreword: Sir Stephen Wall

‘The past is a foreign country’. That foreign country, which James Southern examines in this fascinating and challenging essay, is the one I lived in from 1968, when I joined Her Majesty’s Diplomatic Service from university at the age of 21, until I left 35 years later.

“So, Mr Wall, have you ever had any homosexual experiences”? I had just started at the Foreign Office and this was my Positive Vetting (PV) interview. If I passed, an interesting career beckoned. If not, my career would end before it had started. “Yes”, I replied, “fooling around with other boys at boarding school when I was 10”. Indulgent laughter from my interrogator. “And do you have any homosexual tendencies?” I knew I was sexually attracted to other men. But was a “tendency” the same thing as a “temptation”, my Roman Catholic conscience asked myself? Temptation was no sin. It was giving in to it that was the sin. This was a temptation to sin I would never give in to, so I told myself. “No I do not”, I replied.

As James Southern explains, the FCO never went in for the intensive and intrusive scrutiny of private lives undertaken by the Americans. My PV referees (my father’s best man and my RC parish priest) gave me a glowing report. I was in.

I spent my career, firstly denying my sexuality to myself and, once I had admitted it to myself, regarding it as something to be suppressed: a secret to be taken to the grave for the sake of my family, my faith and my career. Even as late as 1991, when John Major lifted the ban on gay men and lesbians working in the Diplomatic Service and appointed me as the UK Ambassador to the EU in Brussels, I do not believe he would have felt able to make that appointment if I had then been openly gay.

I look back now, rather as we look back at child labour or the denial of equal rights to women, and ask myself how the FCO could have been so hidebound and why I was not braver. But it never occurred to me to challenge the orthodoxy. At one moment in my career, in Paris in the early 1970s when the attractions of my own sex pressed on me insistently, I considered leaving the Service. I ruled it out. I was a practising Catholic. I dreaded coming out to my parents. The legal tolerance of sexual relations *between consenting adults in private* merely underlined that homosexuality was seen as abnormal and perverse. Few walks of life accepted homosexuality as a normal difference. One of my university friends concealed his sexuality throughout his successful career in the knowledge that his survival as a head teacher depended on it. Even in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher could introduce Clause 28 because it chimed with public opinion. Read the British tabloid newspapers at the height of the AIDS crisis and you will find the cruellest

characterisation of its victims as disgusting perverts. Michael Cashman's first ever gay kiss on British television laid him open to abuse in *The Sun* and in public.

The Foreign Office that I joined in 1968 still bore the scars of the Burgess and Maclean cases. In their aftermath, the Americans had questioned our reliability as an Intelligence partner. In no circumstances would a British Government, and therefore Foreign Office officials, put that relationship at risk again. Our job was to represent British interests overseas on the instructions of British Ministers. We were, as James points out, well aware that we were perceived as toffs, living it up in overseas luxury. There was no media sympathy for the hardship of families separated, and the careers of spouses terminated, because of the exigencies of a Service which required us to go wherever and whenever we were posted, with little say on either count. It never occurred to most of us that our duty to lead extended beyond the pursuit of a broadly ethical foreign policy – albeit one that was consequently challenged by the demands of *realpolitik*.

James quotes the submission made by the then Permanent Under Secretary at the FCO, Patrick Wright, to FCO Ministers in 1990 recommending the lifting of the sexuality ban. The minute is circumspect because Wright was anticipating the likely caution of British Ministers whose first point of reference in measuring public opinion was *The Sun*, the newspaper which even Tony Blair thought it necessary to woo on his way to a landslide electoral victory six years later. The conservatism of Sir Humphrey Appleby, the civil servant caricature from the television show *Yes, Minister*, is recognisable enough in reality. The notion of Sir Humphrey leading hapless politicians by the nose is not. The official machine responded then, as it does now, both directly and intuitively to the instincts and wishes of Ministers.

Two years ago, I marched, relaxed and confident, with other gay and lesbian Civil Servants, including a group from today's FCO. In its social attitudes, today's Foreign Office is in step with majority public opinion in Britain. Yesterday's Foreign Office too was in step with majority opinion. Then, we lived in a homophobic country. Now, by and large, we do not. As Civil Servants, we were never going to be pioneers of social reform. I did not find it easy knowing I was a gay man in an organisation where to be gay was a sacking offence. But the Service required levels of commitment and self-sacrifice, especially from the spouses of British diplomats, which were also onerous and harsh in their own way. We stuck with it. Why? Well, partly fear in my case. But also because we were committed to serving our country and strove to do so to the best of our ability. I am proud of that. And delighted that, today, people like me in the Diplomatic Service can be proud of being gay too.

Homosexuality at the Foreign Office, 1967-1991

Introduction: The “Homintern”

In some senses, the history of homosexuality at the Foreign Office¹ needs no introduction. From the sensationalised communist defection of Guy Burgess in the 1950s, through the honey trap that caught up with John Vassall in 1962, to the controversial unmasking of Anthony Blunt announced by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, postwar British history apparently teems with high-profile examples of gay men associated with the Foreign Office who spied for the Soviet Union. The ‘tendency for the public mind to associate homosexuals with spy scandals’, as one anxious diplomat put it in 1974,² certainly has a long and complicated history in twentieth-century Britain – one which looks set to rumble on still further.³

Indeed, the apparently ubiquitous assumption of the existence of a cult of ‘gay spies’ at the Foreign Office – fabricated and mythologised in press and popular culture – means that the historian of postwar British diplomatic life is faced with, as a sad inevitability, the task of picking apart decades of the relationship between sexuality and security. The official position of the Foreign Office, for most of the twentieth century, was clear: homosexuality in a diplomat represented a risk to national security and a *prima facie* presumption of unfitness for a diplomatic career. Until 1991 gay men and lesbians were officially barred from working for the British Diplomatic Service.⁴

Institutional policy is one thing, but the politics of same-sex desire at the Foreign Office also became part of a broader story about generational change amid the buzz of decolonisation, Cold War anxiety, and the social and sexual revolutions of the 1960s. Former Foreign Secretary David Owen expressed a widespread perception of the generation to which Burgess and Blunt belonged:

A culture of homosexuality was pervasive among a whole generation of Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates before the Second World War ...

¹ A note on terminology: this paper will use the terms “Foreign Office” and “FCO” to describe the government department of which the Diplomatic Service was a part. Although some of the documents referred to here predate the merger of the Foreign Office and Commonwealth Relations Office in 1968, “Foreign Office” and “FCO” will be adopted throughout as terms most commonly used to describe the organisation today.

² ‘Senior Promotions: Implications of Homosexuality’, FCO Minute, 6 December 1974, XQV 1/9. For Blunt, see Miranda Carter, *Anthony Blunt: His Lives* (London, 2001); for Vassall, see Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain From Suez to The Beatles* (London, 2005), 596-8; for his own account see John Vassall, *Vassall: The Autobiography of a Spy* (London, 1975). The literature on Burgess is fairly substantial, but for a recent assessment see Andrew Lownie, *Stalin’s Englishman: The Lives of Guy Burgess* (London, 2015).

³ The release in October 2014 of more than 400 files on Burgess and Donald Maclean from the Cabinet Office, Security Services and Foreign Office once again provoked debate about the links between sexuality and security in Cold War Britain.

⁴ This publication makes reference mainly to gay men, because the Foreign Office was a masculine hierarchy which employed predominantly men. Policy was shaped around gay men, and lesbians appear in the documents only tangentially. Where relevant the references to lesbians will be elaborated upon.

They were still around in the Foreign Office and in the ruling establishment of the 1970s. Modernism, collectivism, pacifism and homosexuality were their gods ... the Homintern. They did great harm to this country.⁵

The perception to which he alluded has it that in the 1930s and 1940s the University of Cambridge had been a hotbed of both Marxist politics and homosexuality. Burgess, Maclean (although married) and Blunt were uniformly tarred as children of elites who in close-knit undergraduate communities rebelled against their parents' generation, intellectually, through communism, morally, through homosexuality. Reams of words have been spent trying to substantiate or to sever the links between the sexual mores of 1930s Cambridge and Cold War espionage, with varying results.⁶ All, however, hinge on one crucial question: why were postwar Britons so convinced that there was a 'clear and indisputable link between social exclusiveness, homosexuality, Marxism and treason'?⁷

This paper does not seek to reproduce speculative biographical accounts of the lives of Guy Burgess, Anthony Blunt, or any other 'gay spies' of the twentieth century. Nor does it seek to reduce the experiences of gay men to mere factors in personal decisions about Cold War politics. Its aim is in fact quite the opposite: to understand what persistent associations between sexuality and security in the minds of Foreign Office mandarins can tell us about social life in mid-twentieth-century Britain. Using hitherto-unreleased Foreign Office documents from its archive in Hanslope Park, it tells, for the first time, the story of the sexuality bar at the Foreign Office between the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967 and the lifting of the Bar in 1991; it tells, therefore, the story not just of individuals but of every gay man and lesbian who worked for (or aspired to work for) the postwar British Diplomatic Service.

Viewed chronologically, the history of the sexuality bar at the Foreign Office moves in three distinct phases. The first phase constitutes the Office's initial responses as it became clear that Labour MP Leo Abse's Sexual Offences Bill would in all likelihood decriminalise private homosexual acts between men before too long. With the help of Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, the bill did indeed receive royal assent in July 1967, and in the space of a few months the Foreign Office was forced hastily to improvise a policy on dealing with homosexuals inside and outside the organisation. Their response was swift and clear: a change in policy would not be

⁵ David Owen, *Time to Declare* (London, 1991), 347.

⁶ See, for example, Fred Sommer, 'Anthony Blunt and Guy Burgess, Gay Spies', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 29 (1995), 273-94; Barrie Penrose and Simon Freeman, *Conspiracy of Silence: The Secret Life of Anthony Blunt* (London, 1986), 44-112.

⁷ Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good*, 562.

countenanced, and measures would be taken to ensure that homosexual men would be identified and removed from the organisation. In March 1966, plans had been made to appoint a “Special Investigator” who would head an “Elite Squad” of officers, tasked with compiling detailed information about the private lives of men connected with the Service in order to ascertain whether or not they might be secretly gay.⁸ Investigations would be informed by a ‘homosexual checklist’ devised by a Civil Service doctor, which listed characteristics and tendencies – referred to by officials as ‘danger signs’ – that gay men would supposedly be more likely to exhibit.⁹ Whatever impact the decriminalisation of homosexuality may have had, the effect at the Foreign Office was to identify and eradicate gay men from its ranks.

The next phase of the sexuality bar story spans the 1970s, as gay liberation activism clashed with FCO obstinacy. Rights organisations like the Campaign for Homosexual Equality (CHE) began to pressurise the FCO, challenging its policy and demanding it be held accountable.¹⁰ In 1977, the trade unions the Institution of Professional Civil Servants (IPCS) and the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) both passed resolutions condemning discrimination against gay men in the public service.¹¹ Evidence also emerges from the 1970s of outed gay men within the Diplomatic Service refusing to be quietly retired, bargaining for other jobs or better pension arrangements, recognising that the Office would want to avoid at all costs their stories as victims of the sexuality bar being made public.¹² Indeed, files from the 1970s show us a Foreign Office mandarin struggling with outmoded definitions of homosexuality, beginning to question the logic of the sexuality bar, and above all terrified that internal wrangling about its policy would become enmeshed with *public* discourse – outside its closed institutional domain.

The 1980s brings us to the third and final phase of the sexuality bar story. As attitudes liberalised outside the FCO, so the diplomats defending the Bar were forced to turn to increasingly desperate justifications for its maintenance. One diplomat questioned whether the international community would ever accept ‘declared homosexuals as representatives of The Queen’.¹³ Others worried that gay diplomats, were they allowed to serve, would simply be ‘unpostable’ because homosexuality was illegal or socially unacceptable in so many of the countries in which Britain retained a diplomatic presence.¹⁴ Yet at the same time, thanks to public letters, press reports and various other interventions, the language of human rights and of anti-discrimination turned policy discussions into legal and ethical

⁸ ‘Investigation into Homosexual Cases’, 8 March 1966, XQV 153, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive. Unless specified, all archival citations hereafter refer to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Archive.

⁹ Letters between FCO officials, 28 March 1966, 4 October 1966, 4 May 1967, XQV 153.

¹⁰ See Paul Temperton, General Secretary, Campaign for Homosexual Equality to ., 26 June 1972, XQV 1/12.

¹¹ Staff Side, National Whitley Council to Civil Service Department, 21 September 1977, XQV 1/9.

¹² ‘Selection Board 1 March 1978: Extract from Minutes, Extract from Agenda’, 1 March 1978, XQV 1/9.

¹³ ‘Homosexuality: Union Side Letter’, 8 October 1981, XQV 1/9 (B).

¹⁴ Personnel Policy Department, FCO, 17 February 1986, XPS 412/10.

discussions, gradually rendering the Bar indefensible. In July 1991, Prime Minister John Major announced that 'changing social attitudes' meant that homosexuality should no longer be a barrier to employment in the Diplomatic Service.

This teleological story, though, from "Elite Squad" investigators to Major's announcement, obscures some of the more valuable lessons that may be gleaned from a history of homosexuality at the Foreign Office. We must delve deeper than the story of gradual liberalising of attitudes, and ask: on what basis was an institution purporting to be representative of Britain able to ignore changes in domestic law and set its own rules when it came to employing gay men? In order to do this, the remainder of this publication takes a thematic look at three aspects of the sexuality bar, trying to understand each in turn. First, the arguments used to defend the Bar between the 1960s and 1990s will be outlined and analysed. Next, the investigation turns to the various definitions of "homosexuality" in circulation among Britain's diplomats during the period in question. Finally, it turns to the lifting of the Bar in 1991, and asks, what changes in attitudes at the Foreign Office allowed gay men and lesbians to be officially permitted to work as diplomats?

Through the second half of the twentieth century Britain adjusted to seismic alterations in society-wide attitudes to sexuality and human rights. This paper offers important insights into an important but still unanswered question on this matter: what did Britain's sexual revolution look like from within the walls of one of its most conservative and elitist institutions?

Defending the Bar

Prior to the 1967 decriminalisation, Annex 8, Paragraph 2(o) of the Manual of Personnel Security Measures (MPSM) made explicit the reason why gay men were not permitted to work as diplomats. It stated that an unsuitable individual:

Has been or is reasonably suspected of being a homosexual or has engaged in infamous, immoral or disgraceful conduct such as might expose him to a blackmail approach by a hostile intelligence service.¹⁵

The "blackmail argument" outlined here was the closest the FCO ever came to an official "line" on homosexuality. By the end of the 1960s, ideological defectors – like Blunt and Burgess – influenced by the intellectual environment of 1930s Cambridge had begun to dry up. Instead, foreign intelligence serviced began to rely increasingly

¹⁵ Chairman of Personnel Security Committee, 'Cabinet, Official Committee on Security: Security Implications of the Sexual Offences Act, 1967', SM(O)(67)19, 19 December 1967, DSQV 144.

on sex as a way of ensnaring British officials. The KGB specialised in honey traps, while the East German Stasi became experts in using “Romeos” – men who would emotionally manipulate female secretaries into leaking information.¹⁶ Indeed, the FCO was well aware that the blackmailing of John Vassall (using photographs of the junior official having sex with other men) was far from an isolated incident. In 1975, for instance, a West German masseur living in London was recruited by the Stasi ‘to talent spot and cultivate homosexual members of a health club’ for espionage purposes.¹⁷ The threat of blackmail – although in fact it rarely found success – was a real one.

Yet the evidence suggests that the primary reasons for the maintenance of the sexuality bar had less to do with the threat of blackmail than they did with deep-rooted cultural attitudes at the FCO. No longer able to ignore homosexuality as a phenomenon buried beneath domestic law, officials were instead forced to confront it as a moral issue, the institutional interpretation of which would govern policy. In November 1967, the Personnel Security Committee met to decide ‘whether homosexuality in itself should raise a presumption of unfitness for a positive vetting post, or whether it was only the vulnerability of a homosexual to blackmail or pressure that should raise such a presumption’.¹⁸ Though the meeting was inconclusive, this distinction between homosexuality as unacceptable in general, versus homosexuality as a matter to be decided on a case-by-case basis, set the tone for policy discussions for decades to come. The FCO knew that the change in law significantly reduced the likelihood that an individual would want to conceal his homosexuality. If it allowed gay men to be open with the Office the threat would be drastically reduced still further. What had to be decided, therefore, were the criteria by which homosexuality might be judged to be a risk to security.

With no legal basis for the exclusion of gay men, the Foreign Office had to redefine what it was about homosexuality that supposedly made gay men vulnerable to blackmail. That the black-and-white legal argument no longer applied was a crucial change. One official noted in 1967 that ‘I do not agree ... that in homosexual cases we are concerned purely with the security and not with the moral aspects of the case.’¹⁹ Another, five years later, warned the Campaign for Homosexual Equality in a letter that ‘security considerations were not the only inhibition affecting the employment of homosexuals in the Civil Service’.²⁰ The absence of a legal distinction between acceptable and unacceptable forms of sexuality, then, led to the development of an *ad hoc* attitude to policymaking, which

¹⁶ Gordon Corera, *MI6: Life and Death in the British Secret Service* (London, 2011), 227-28.

¹⁷ Cabinet Personnel Security Committee, ‘Security Policy in Regard to Homosexuality’, 28 April 1981, XQV 1/9 (A).

¹⁸ ‘Security Implications of the Sexual Offences Act, 1967’, SM(O)(PS)(67) 4th Meeting, 8 November 1967, DSQV 144.

¹⁹ Letter between FCO officials, 23 February 1967, XQV 153.

²⁰ Civil Service Department: Establishment Officers’ Meeting, EOM(72)11th Meeting, 5 October 1972, XQV 1/12.

allowed diplomats to venture opinions within a loose framework of moral relativism and make or break individual lives and careers on the basis of uninformed judgement. An official in 1967 suggested that 'homosexuality affected a man's normal containment and weakened his equilibrium by making him to some extent reliant on contacts outside his normal circle'. Another in the same year said that 'offences against minors or importuning in public remain criminal offences; there can be no certainty that an individual with homosexual tendencies will not resort to such illegal practices'.²¹ Numerous individual cases throughout the 1960s, '70s and '80s demonstrate that gay men were interrogated, made to recount in detail the exact nature of their private sexual lives, and then quietly retired or moved to another government department. Indeed, so widespread was the practice of "burying" such cases that at a meeting in 1972 one FCO official reported that 'the DHSS bewailed the fact that ... their ranks were swelling with Communists and homosexuals'.²²

Deciding how to deal with suspected homosexuals not through policy but case-by-case at times left discussions open to pure bigotry. In the early 1980s, after Anthony Blunt's espionage had been revealed publicly, a sudden wave of frank internal debates took place as the FCO reeled from external criticism. One very senior official wrote that 'what we all want to maintain [is] to discourage homosexuals from joining the Service [and] to encourage them to leave once identified'. He thought it 'important to remember' that homosexuality was 'probably regarded by most British people as immoral', a situation he doubted 'will ever change'.²³ Another went even further, commenting on the supposed abnormality of gay lifestyles, before going on to declare:

I am in favour of erecting a notice, "No homosexuals should apply" on the perimeter of the Service and, when one comes to light, trying, humanely and conscientiously, to find him alternative employment in less sensitive government service if possible.²⁴

The absence of authoritative policy meant that individual diplomats were constantly expressing their own deep moral convictions in increasingly aggressive ways. It is telling that the statements above were made in the early 1980s, reflecting in part the partisan aggression of political discourse in that period, but also the fact that subjective opinion ruled supreme at the FCO, and in negotiating an aggregate official position on homosexuality, all was up for grabs.

²¹ Ibid; Chairman of Personnel Security Committee, 'Cabinet, Official Committee on Security: Security Implications of the Sexual Offences Act, 1967', SM(O)(67)19, 19 December 1967, DSQV 144.

²² Assistant Under-Secretary of State to Head of Personnel Policy Department, 12 October 1972, XQV 1/12.

²³ FCO Minute, 11 May 1981, XQV 1/9(A).

²⁴ 'Homosexuality: Union Side Letter', FCO Minute, 9 October 1981, XQV 1/9(B).

The pertinent point here is that throughout the period 1967-91, treatment of homosexuality at the FCO was predicated on one thing: *imagined* social attitudes. Diplomats were obsessed with the notion that they were representative of “public opinion” in Britain, and equally determined not to try to shape or lead that opinion in any way. From as early as 1967 we read the following:

With time public opinion here and the laws abroad may evolve to such an extent that we too can take a more relaxed attitude towards homosexuality, but this time has certainly not yet come.²⁵

By 1974 the situation had not changed, with one official pointing out that there was ‘still a good deal of public prejudice against homosexuals’, especially outside London.²⁶ Another in the same year asserted that ‘the likely attitudes of colleagues and contacts must play an important part’ in deciding suitability.²⁷ Most tellingly of all, one official in 1978 responded to internal criticism of the policy by citing the law on discrimination:

... there is at present no legislation which prohibits discrimination on grounds of sexual preference ... in the absence of specific legislation on such matters (on which there are strongly held personal views) the practice of the Service must be influenced by the current balance of public opinion, which is of course reflected in the views of our colleagues.²⁸

Here, then, we have the boldest possible statement of the reasons for the FCO’s decades-long inability to change its outmoded stance on homosexuality. Quite literally on the same page as defending the exclusion of a large section of the population from the FCO, this diplomat reaffirmed his belief that he and his colleagues were representative of that population and its opinions.

Throughout the 1980s the FCO continued to worry about how the sexuality bar was perceived by the Church, on television, and among domestic and international publics. The shaping of policy became a scramble for legitimacy, in which the winners were those who could more authoritatively “interpret” and express supposed public sentiment. The only losers, of course, were the gay men whose

²⁵ FCO Minute, 26 October 1967, XQV 153.

²⁶ ‘Senior Promotions: Implications of Homosexuality’, Minutes from Meeting, 6 December 1974, XQV 1/9.

²⁷ ‘Senior Promotions: Implications of Homosexuality’, FCO Minute, 14 October 1974, XQV 1/9.

²⁸ FCO Minute, 14 April 1978, XQV 1/9.

careers were in the hands of a Diplomatic Service driven by the idea that it 'should not seek in any way to get ahead of public opinion'.²⁹

Homosexuality: Diplomatic Definitions

Diplomats at the Foreign Office had neither the legal nor the factual basis for a consistent policy on homosexuality. As we have seen, this led to instability and confusion: diplomats' personal prejudices were privileged over the experiences of gay men, and homosexuality was never officially "removed" from the FCO – rather, it was quietly moved on and made the responsibility of other government departments. Ad hoc policymaking such as this, however, begs the important question: how did FCO mandarins define "homosexuality"? We know that decisions were made on a moral basis, but what were the terms on which those judgements were made?

As it became clear that homosexuality was to be partially decriminalised, 1960s diplomats knew that the FCO would need quickly to develop techniques for dealing with gay men in the Service. Searching for policy ideas, they knew exactly where to look: across the Atlantic, where the systematised detection and removal of gay diplomats had been operating ruthlessly since the early 1950s. Ironically in part a reaction to the defection of Guy Burgess (who had served an erratic stint in Washington), but more an attempt to define Cold War loyalty in terms of masculinity, American conservatives coordinated what became known as the "lavender scare" – a plan to rid the State Department of the perceived threat of homosexuality. Far more prolific than Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist witch hunts, the "purge of the perverts" resulted in 400 State Department employees losing their jobs for 'real or imagined homosexuality' under the Truman administration alone; the figure rose to over 1,000 by the end of the 1960s.³⁰ Linked with a susceptibility to communism, and to postwar US Civil Servant stereotypes of 'effete "cookie-pushing" Ivy League internationalist homosexuals', accusing an American diplomat of being gay became a powerful political weapon in the scramble for legitimate leadership during the early Cold War.³¹ State Department Investigating Officers followed men to their homes, kept tabs on the bars and restaurants at which they ate and drank, and used psychologists to compile incredibly detailed records on their personal habits and characteristics. By the time it was destroyed in 1977, FBI founding Director J. Edgar Hoover's 'Sex Deviates'

²⁹ Assistant Under-Secretary of State to Head of Personnel Policy Department, 12 October 1972, XQV 1/12.

³⁰ Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst, 2001), 66; David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (London, 2004), 76.

³¹ Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood*, 65.

database ran to more than 300,000 pages.³² The US operation to purge its Foreign Service of homosexuality was all-encompassing, and provided a template for identifying and dealing with gay diplomats.

The Foreign Office initially drew heavily on the American model when constructing its own techniques. One official in 1965 produced a sycophantic report on the situation across the Atlantic:

Great stress is laid on the building up of detailed background information by neighbourhood inquiry, quite apart from the testimony of the three professional and three personal referees required ... particular attention is paid not only to any clear signs of sexual aberration ... but also to more general indicators – effeminacy, solitariness, psychological quirks of any sort ... recreational and drinking habits, bars frequented ... This information is kept in a central homosexual intelligence bank and has proved of great assistance in cross-checking on other homosexuals and in developing material on which to conduct an interview.³³

Two things stand out in this report: the *characteristics* of the individual, and the *places* he visited. This, then, was the American definition of homosexuality on which the Foreign Office at first drew. Effeminacy and lack of ease with colleagues would arouse suspicion, and socialising in the “wrong” places with the “wrong” people might make things worse still. In 1966, the FCO asked a doctor serving in another Civil Service department to compile what one official termed a ‘spotting a homosexual checklist’.³⁴ The resulting document drew heavily on its American counterpart, and listed among its ‘danger signs’ recreational habits, tastes in music and sport, evidence of depression or anxiety, and emotional attachment to family members.³⁵

Yet, significantly, the checklist was never used in its original form. The problem was that FCO officials simply weren’t convinced that the American way of doing things would be effective in this country:

[American] Investigating Officers are prepared to conduct interviews lasting, if necessary, as long as a whole day and to question in considerable depth a suspect’s sex life. These methods would not be

³² Ibid., 154.

³³ ‘Policy Towards Homosexuals’, FCO Minute, 13 December 1965, XQV 153.

³⁴ FCO Minute, 4 October 1966, XQV 153.

³⁵ FCO Minute, 28 March 1966, XQV 153.

tolerated in this country to the extent they are in America ... [we must be] fully conversant with the problems which we face in a very different climate of public opinion.³⁶

In Britain, officers felt, the fear of homosexual subversion within the diplomatic corps was insufficient to justify the degree of intrusion that would accompany American-style investigation. Essentially, while diplomats were keen to 'improve our arrangements for dealing with homosexuality', they believed that this was a matter to be dealt with sensitively, quietly, and above all personally. 'I prefer' one official remarked, 'to avoid unnecessary formality in this peculiarly sensitive sphere.'³⁷ Another remarked that the '[a]ssessment of homosexual tendencies is a skilled matter', which, a later meeting made clear, would be left to the discretion of Heads of Departments to decide upon.³⁸ While it may have drawn on American thinking to begin with, the Foreign Office quickly rejected the idea that homosexuality could be dealt with by a process of medical study, scrupulous investigation and the ruthless sacking of individuals.

The American definition of homosexuality was predicated on the idea that homosexuality was inextricably linked to deficient masculinity, and deficient masculinity necessarily implied questionable Cold War loyalty and trustworthiness. In Britain, the aversion to probing an individual's private life for evidence of masculinity suggests that such links simply did not exist. Homosexuality did not imply untrustworthiness at the Foreign Office – instead officials were concerned with making a distinction *within* their idea of homosexuality to separate those who could be considered acceptably trustworthy and those who could not. This distinction was being made as early as 1967:

In security terms there is a considerable difference between the homosexual who admits his perversion and is prepared to discuss it as a moral issue and the man who will not admit that he is a homosexual even when confronted with evidence showing that he is.³⁹

Lacking the language of Cold War effeminacy and susceptibility to communism, Britain's diplomats began to develop an understanding of homosexuality which

³⁶ 'Vetting: Detection of Homosexuals', FCO Minute, 25 July 1967, XQV 153.

³⁷ 'The Detection of Homosexuals', FCO Minute, 22 April 1968, XQV 153.

³⁸ FCO Minute, 16 February 1967; 'Security Implications of the Sexual Offences Act, 1967: Note by the Chairman of the Personnel Security Committee', 29 September 1967, DSQV 144.

³⁹ FCO Minute, 23 February 1967, XQV 153.

placed the responsibility solely with the subject. Being gay was not the issue, it was the lifestyle which one chose to pursue in knowledge of one's sexuality that mattered. Sexuality was not innate or fixed, but instead a choice about one's identity.

The ways in which FCO mandarins wrote about lesbianism are especially revealing on this point. Lesbians were seldom discussed, but when they were it was as a bulwark against which problems with *male* homosexuality could be defined. A Security Department meeting in 1968 concluded that although lesbians technically were considered a security risk, they 'tended to be less promiscuous than male homosexuals, more stable in their relationships, and therefore on the whole less vulnerable to pressure.'⁴⁰ Returning to the issue in 1975, an official claimed that lesbians were 'emotionally more stable than male homosexuals'. Provided that a woman had 'a stable relationship about which she is perfectly open, both at work and among her friends and family' it might be possible 'to consider her employment on classified work in the UK'.⁴¹ As part of an extensive Cabinet investigation in 1981, another diplomat concluded much the same:

The more relaxed attitude taken by society towards lesbians compared with the social stigma which still attaches to male homosexuality reflects differences in the general behaviour patterns of male and female homosexuals. These differences have some security significance. There is very little lesbian prostitution; lesbian relationships tend to be relatively stable; there is not the same widespread interest among lesbians in very young sexual partners as there is among male homosexuals, and the female "gay" scene is much less commercialised than the male.⁴²

Nothing about same-sex desire implied untrustworthiness. What mattered to the Foreign Office was identity: gay men were distinguished from lesbians by their incompatibility with what were considered "stable" lifestyles. Masculinity would not be a security consideration; failure to comply with normative heterosexual lifestyle would be what mattered.

Repeatedly, the Foreign Office would reaffirm its conviction that in security terms there were acceptable and unacceptable forms of homosexuality. One official in 1981 reminded his colleagues that 'a homosexual was not necessarily a security risk; as with other sexual proclivities, his vulnerability arose from the circumstances

⁴⁰ 'Positive Vetting: Security Significance of Lesbianism', SM(O)(68) 3rd Meeting, 23 October 1968, XQV 1/7.

⁴¹ FCO Minute, 7 February 1975, XQV 1/9.

⁴² Cabinet: Personnel Security Committee, 'Security Policy in Regard to Homosexuality', 28 April 1981, XQV 1/9(A).

in which he indulged his preference'.⁴³ Another in the same year was more explicit, comparing sexuality to 'financial responsibility', and saying that whether an individual was bankrupted by 'women, drink or the horses', it did not matter – the bankruptcy was what counted. Adding, with a touch of callousness, that a 'homosexual officer, male or female, presents no security or discipline problem if he chooses to remain celibate', the officer made clear that lifestyle, not sex, was at the heart of the Foreign Office's understanding of the relationship between sexuality and security.

Indeed, the inconsistency with which the Foreign Office dealt with the various individual cases that appear in the files highlights the malleability of "homosexuality" as a term over the span of the sexuality bar. As early as the 1960s, one diplomat was fighting to retain his security clearance despite having been outed. The report tells us that he 'claims that, although he admits to homosexual tendencies, he is not guilty of homosexual acts.'⁴⁴ The outcome of the case is unclear, but making an argument on these lines is revealing about the way the sexuality bar operated. A similar case in 1974 revealed one official's self-defensive description of his homosexuality:

He appeared to have slept with a girl when in his teens – "a very nasty experience" and soon after entered into a homosexual relationship "throughout my service in the RAF" ... he had been active (homosexually) throughout his career in the FCO, but "no-one likely to be opposed to British interests involved me". He is still active but feels "the desires and urges are falling away with advancing years" ... [he] implicitly acknowledges that it would have been desirable for him to contain his homosexual urges. He has ... been frank in confessing his acts. I think this must be regarded as being to his credit.⁴⁵

The accused official's arguments led the investigating team to conclude that he should be dealt with 'as gently as possible', suggesting that his frank confession and claim to have lived responsibly held some sway with the investigating team.⁴⁶ Having admitted his homosexuality, his keenness to demonstrate loyalty and to appear responsibly in control of the ways in which his sexual urges were expressed

⁴³ Cabinet: Personnel Security Committee, minutes of meeting held on 21 May 1981, XQV 1/9(A).

⁴⁴ FCO Minute, 26 October 1967, XQV 153.

⁴⁵ Security Department, 'Homosexuality in the Diplomatic Service: [.]', FCO Minute, 30 November 1976, XQV 1/9.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

are clear indicators of where the boundaries of “acceptable” homosexuality lay at the Foreign Office.

This is not the only piece of evidence to suggest that officers were given the opportunity to prove that their sexuality was compatible with diplomatic work. A decade later in 1984 one senior diplomat wrote that ‘a married male officer who has admitted a single homosexual act has been posted to a Western European capital’, adding that there were a number of acknowledged homosexuals with stable relationships who are serving in London on APV certificates.’⁴⁷ In fact, diplomats were no closer to clearly defining homosexuality than they had been in the 1960s:

‘The main difficulty we have in applying the present rules lies in establishing what constitutes homosexuality. The spectrum is wide, ranging from the person with several lovers to an individual who has established a stable relationship through to cases in which an isolated and apparently uncharacteristic homosexual act comes to light or there are uncorroborated indications of homosexual leanings. The Security Commission’s recommendations do not define what constitutes homosexuality although it is reasonably clear that the basic picture before the Commission was that of the habitual homosexual.’⁴⁸

Here, explicitly in print, we get to the crux of the Foreign Office definition of homosexuality. Clumsily ignorant in its way, and yet at the same time lacking in the zealous appetite for persecution that applied in the United States, its basic principle appears to be an openness to interpretation. The salient point, then, is that decisions about the careers of outed gay diplomats were made neither on the basis of security considerations nor on homophobic whims alone, but on a combination of both. At times drawing on notions of trustworthiness, at others on changing conceptions of gay lifestyles, diplomats firmly shifted the responsibility for distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices onto the individuals concerned, in order that they might keep homosexuality at the Foreign Office out of public discussion by dealing with each personally on an individual basis.

⁴⁷ Draft minute for PUS to Secretary of State, 17 May 1984, XPS 412/7. APV refers to Alternative Positive Vetting, a form of security clearance by which individuals are permitted to serve in a limited number of low-sensitivity positions.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Lifting the Bar

If one thing terrified postwar British diplomats above all else, more than KGB spies or a posting to an unstable dictatorship, it was British public opinion. In 1967, months before the Abse bill received royal assent, an internal report into the 'Diplomatic Service Image' made clear the FCO's anxiety about its relationship with the outside world:

The mass of the British public envisage the middle and upper echelons of their Civil Service as being a race apart ... They regard the Diplomatic Service ... as being peopled by the same "ethnic group", but an even more exclusive tribe; perhaps a bit cleverer, certainly more "toffee-nosed" and out-of-touch than their Home Civil Service cousins ... ⁴⁹

Consistently, from the 1960s onward, the Foreign Office was under threat from those in and out of government who questioned the extent to which a fading power like Britain needed a diplomatic service at all. Always vulnerable to budget cuts, and even at one stage narrowly avoiding merger with the Home Office at the hands of Sir Keith Berrill's Central Policy Review Staff in 1977, the FCO has always had to keep one uneasy eye on its popularity with the public it serves. It is this perennial concern about reputation that holds the key to understanding the lifting of the sexuality bar in 1991.

Tellingly, the first reference to public opinion in the FCO files discussing the sexuality bar was a bullish one. A senior figure in the Security Department, commenting on the change in legislation in 1967, wrote that 'although our position is weak in a strictly legal sense', this would not be too much of a problem, owing to the fact that because 'the security of the state is concerned ... we should have little trouble in justifying our actions if it ever came to a public debate'.⁵⁰ Such confidence, however, did not last long. Four years later, the growing gay rights movement was still finding its way around the institutions at the heart of British government, and in 1971 the General Secretary of the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, Paul Temperton, wrote to the Foreign Office as 'purely a fact-finding exercise' to establish the following:

- (a) if you would refuse a person a job because he or she was known to be homosexual;
- (b) if you would remove a person known to be homosexual

⁴⁹ John Campbell, 'The Diplomatic Service Image', 27 February 1967, The National Archives, CSC/71/71.

⁵⁰ FCO Minute, 26 October 1967, XQV 153.

from your employment or transfer that person from an existing job; (c) if, for any reason, you would tend to favour for promotion married men (or women) rather than single men (or women) over 35; (d) if you view a person's sexual preferences and activities as completely irrelevant to his official duties.⁵¹

Temperton's challenge is revealing about the way the early gay rights movement viewed the links between sexuality and professional life. It also, however, revealed that the Foreign Office was at the start of the 1970s already beginning to worry about defending the sexuality bar in a public arena. The response to the letter took almost a full month to draft, as various senior diplomats intervened to suggest the form which it should take. One such commentator confirmed that the barometer of public opinion could no longer be ignored:

Some Established Officers [sic.] thought that public pressure would continue to build up for a liberalisation of Government attitudes. Others thought that, contrariwise, we could not rule out a public backlash. We should not seek in any way to get ahead of public opinion.⁵²

The response to Temperton was somewhat dismissive,⁵³ but his inquiry had crucially alerted the FCO that it was now battling with increasingly diverse voices in the public sphere, and that public support could no longer be taken for granted when it came to the issue of the sexuality bar.

As the 1970s progressed, further evidence emerged of the power of public opinion to sway FCO policy on homosexuality. In early 1976, an officer posted in East Asia was accused of being gay. Denying the charge at first, the officer was interrogated on more than one occasion before admitting on 24 November that 'he was a homosexual and had been one all his life.'⁵⁴ The Security Department, returning to the case in 1978, cited the officer's record: 'Standby, pending premature retirement on security grounds, since September 1977.' A decision, then, had clearly been made, but the files reveal that the officer in question, buoyed by the idea that a public debate was something that the FCO wanted to avoid at all costs, began to bargain for a better deal. The negotiations made the FCO nervous:

⁵¹ Paul Temperton, General Secretary, Campaign for Homosexual Equality to ., 26 June 1972, XQV 1/12.

⁵² Assistant Under-Secretary of State to Head of Personnel Policy Department, 12 October 1972, XQV 1/12.

⁵³ Senior Principal, Civil Service Department to Paul Temperton, 2 November 1972, XQV 1/12.

⁵⁴ Security Department, 'Homosexuality in the Diplomatic Service', 30 November 1976, XQV 1/9.

He seems far from being anything like an active campaigner for homosexual rights, but he might still contest his early retirement and might still appeal to an Industrial Tribunal ... this is hardly the sort of case where we could recommend the Secretary of State to stop proceedings ... by certifying that it would be against the national interest for the case to be heard ... Any legal proceedings or any publicity that [he] might otherwise seek could attract a good deal of public notice.⁵⁵

What is especially revealing about these comments is the FCO's awareness of gay rights. Even though the idea that the accused officer might be an active campaigner was dismissed, it is clear nonetheless that the FCO knew any debate about the case might well be conducted in terms of incipient 1970s identity politics. Indeed, although the eventual fate of the officer is not quite clear, the case did in fact persuade the FCO to change the wording of its Manual of Personnel Security Measures – the guide to spotting untrustworthy individuals. One officer commented that some passages in the Manual 'would not look at all good if they ever came out in public', promising to 'get Security Department to look into ... improving the wording in case they ever did leak out in public'.⁵⁶ This case represents the first admission among British diplomats that the sexuality bar might in fact be regarded as unjust and unjustifiable.

As the 1970s drew to a close, a significant transition was made in the manner in which the Bar was debated. Discussions were no longer limited to the confines of the diplomatic community, and the range of differing voices attacking the bar diversified and multiplied. In 1978, for example, an academic from the Social Sciences department at the University of Kent wrote to *The Times* to point out to the FCO that the 'belief that homosexuals are more prone to "character defects" than others is no more than a part of that syndrome of prejudice that stigmatizes homosexuality.' He added that the Australian Foreign Affairs Department had lifted its own bar and posted one gay man to 'an extremely sensitive diplomatic posting'.⁵⁷ By the early 1980s, diplomats were complaining of being 'nearly picketed by a mini-gay rights lobby in Aberdeen',⁵⁸ and dealing with angry letters containing comments such as the following, printed in a national university careers magazine:

⁵⁵ Security Department, 'Grade 5: Withdrawal of PV Clearance', FCO Minute, 30 November 1976, XQV 1/9.

⁵⁶ 'Homosexuals in the Diplomatic Service', FCO Minute, 17 December 1976, XQV 1/9.

⁵⁷ Mr C.A. Rootes, 'Homosexuals and Security', letter to *The Times*, 12 May 1978, XQV 1/9.

⁵⁸ Personnel Policy Department, 'Homosexuality and Recruitment', FCO Minute, 7 February 1983, XPS 412/8.

... the 1982 reprinted version of the Diplomatic Service brochure contains on page 21 the sentence – “Homosexuality, even if acknowledged, is a bar to employment in the Diplomatic Service” ... I find it quite unacceptable that our information rooms should contain printed material which excludes a significantly sized minority of the population from applying for a position on grounds which I believe are founded solely on anti-gay prejudice rather than that on the ability to do the job.⁵⁹

This excerpt reveals, of course, that well into the 1980s the FCO continued to be explicit about the sexuality bar in its recruitment material. The fact, however, that it was cut and pasted from a magazine, discussed at length by the Personnel Policy Department, and dismissed via a written exchange with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, demonstrates the lengths to which the FCO was willing to go to contain public criticism of its policy.

As the 1980s progressed, however, the FCO increasingly was forced to grapple with the relationship between homosexuality and public opinion. The so-called security argument had by now fallen away: in 1981, an official from the Personnel Policy Department dismissed the ‘circular nature’ of the security argument and pointed out that ‘irrespective of whether or not homosexuality is socially tolerated’ it was ‘untenable’.⁶⁰ Unable to rely on this traditional line of argument, diplomats now began to look to other ways of assessing the viability of the Bar – an exercise which led to exhaustive reflection on how gay diplomats might operate and be received in various imagined social contexts.

Crucially, the theoretical idea of a gay diplomat had entered diplomats’ consciousness. Some imagined entirely negative scenarios: an FCO official in 1981 argued that homosexuality was ‘still socially unacceptable, at least in the kind of government milieu in which foreign diplomats are obliged to operate’.⁶¹ Another worried openly that ‘critical sections of public opinion in this country would not understand the appointment of declared homosexuals as representatives of The Queen’.⁶² Indeed, in a survey conducted by the FCO in 1982, apparently only twenty per cent of missions responded to say that ‘it would be possible for a homosexual to be accepted’ in their host countries as British diplomats.⁶³ That a world in which gay

⁵⁹ Mike Williams (Careers Adviser, Bradford University) to David Bone (Careers Adviser, Bristol Polytechnic), ‘Code of Practice – Anti-Gay Discrimination’, *Phoenix*, November 1982, XPS 412/8.

⁶⁰ Personnel Policy Department), 6 November 1981, XQV 1/9(B).

⁶¹ Acting Chief Clerk, FCO, 13 October 1981, XQV 1/9(B).

⁶² Personnel Operations Department to Assistant Under-Secretary of State, ‘Homosexuality: Union Side Letter’, 8 October 1981, XQV 1/9(B).

⁶³ ‘Note to Press Officers: The Security Commission Report’, 19 May 1982, XPS 412/8.

diplomats were being posted was being imagined, though, was a hugely significant step.

In fact, some diplomats began to reflect more positively on a potential change to the rules. As early as 1981, the Head of Personnel Operations Department implored that in keeping gay men and lesbians out of the Diplomatic Service 'we are arbitrarily depriving ourselves of the talents of a sector of the population, some of whom could have much to contribute to our work'.⁶⁴ At the end of the decade, the Head of Personnel Policy Department made the argument that recruitment in the 1990s would be tough for the FCO, and that the fact that up to ten per cent of the population might be homosexual meant that a significant amount of talent was being wasted.⁶⁵ Arguments such as this, drawing on the idea of "meritocracy" and "wasted talent", started to class homosexuals alongside other members of the public as potential recruits.

The personal effects of the Bar began to surface more and more frequently. In 1986, a student from the University of Manchester wrote to the Prime Minister:

For a long time now I have entertained the idea of applying for a post in the Diplomatic Service, and am advised by my tutors that such a career would suit me admirably – that my self-confidence, presentation, intellectual ability, and articulacy, would ensure mutual advantage both to myself and the Service were I to be given a post. It seems, however, that whatever qualities I may possess are irrelevant since I am a homosexual.⁶⁶

His argument – that he was a human being above all who wanted 'to serve my country, and to serve it as a diplomat', was not exceptional.⁶⁷ In the same year Foreign Office legal advisers were assessing whether or not the sexuality bar was in contravention of recent precedents set at the European Court of Justice. In the end they decided that although the European Convention 'protects the right to private life', it nonetheless 'gives no right of access to the civil service'.⁶⁸ Despite the blocks to recruitment of homosexuals suggested by both these instances, however, it is clear that the debate was being conducted on quite different terms to those which it had previously.

In the years approaching the lifting of the Bar, the FCO's interpretation of gay men's unsuitability to diplomatic work on the basis of lifestyle and personal identity became unsustainable. The Staff Side of the Whitley Council (an organisation representing Civil Servants) clearly set out its case that individuals should be

⁶⁴ Personnel Operations Department, 'Homosexuality', FCO Minute, 5 October 1981, XQV 1/9(B).

⁶⁵ Personnel Policy Department, 'Homosexuality', FCO Minute, 17 October 1989, XPS 412/19.

⁶⁶ Jason Shaw to Margaret Thatcher, 29 January 1986, XPS 412/10.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Diplomatic Service Legal Adviser to Personnel Policy Department, 10 November 1986, XPS 412/10.

‘considered on their merits and abilities’.⁶⁹ The Society of Public Servants and the Council of Civil Service Unions both made strong declarations opposing the ban.⁷⁰ In 1989, a review by Personnel Policy Department had ‘agreed that the balance of the security, social climate, and analogue services arguments and perhaps on the recruitment front came down in favour of a change of policy’.⁷¹

It was Patrick Wright, however – then Permanent Under Secretary – who best captured the significance of the slow change in FCO attitudes. Concluding in 1990 that the sexuality bar was indeed outdated, Wright summed up the Foreign Office position:

Ministers may therefore conclude that this is not the moment for a change of policy, still less for the FCO to be seen to be “leading the pack” in Whitehall. But I hope that they will take into account the extent to which we have now fallen behind the international pack, quite apart from being out of step with the rest of the Civil Service, including at least one of the three Intelligence Agencies, GCHQ.⁷²

What the files under scrutiny in this paper indicate, above all, is that it was a *general* change in attitudes in Britain towards homosexuality which rendered the sexuality bar at the Foreign Office anachronistic and indefensible. The more pertinent question, however, as Wright understood, is whether the Foreign Office ever had a *responsibility* to lead the way in changing official and public attitudes. Throughout the lifespan of the Bar, the FCO existed in a vacuum, refusing to bow to any form of pressure to change its stance until the very end. Its refusal to change tells us about the malleability of definitions of homosexuality from the 1960s onwards, and about how the FCO policy-making process enabled a unique view of sexuality and security to be developed and sustained for so long. More than this, though, it tells us that the FCO was, for the most part, able to function so separately from the society it served that it could afford to design and adhere to its own moral, legal and ethical codes on a separate plane from the rest of the country.

⁶⁹ Staff Side Chairman, Whitley Council to Deputy Chief Clerk, 28 September 1981, XQV 1/9(A).

⁷⁰ Branch Chairman, Society of Public Servants to Security Department, 31 March 1981, XQV 1/9(A); Deputy Secretary, Council of Civil Service Unions to Civil Service Management and Personnel Office, 30 October 1984, XPS 412/10.

⁷¹ Personnel Policy Department, ‘Homosexuality’, 8 November 1989, XPS 412/19.

⁷² Patrick Wright (Permanent Under Secretary, FCO), ‘Homosexuals and the Diplomatic Service’, FCO Minute, 11 February 1990, XPS 412/23.

Conclusion

When, a few months following John Major's announcement, the FCO learned that Filmit Productions were planning a documentary about homosexuality in the Civil Service, diplomats took little time in giving the project their full cooperation and approval. 'We have', wrote one security officer, 'a pretty good story to tell'.⁷³ Once the files studied in this paper have been released to The National Archives, that story will be available to members of the public to read and to decide whether or not they agree.

What this publication has tried to do is to tease out some of the important themes and lessons to be gleaned from a study of the Foreign Office sexuality bar. Diplomats' arguments, based not on logical security measures but on case-by-case moral judgements, allow us a glimpse of gay liberation politics as seen from within the Foreign Office. Diplomats' shifting definitions of what it meant to be gay during the second half of the twentieth century teach us about the development of diplomatic but also queer identity. Finally, the FCO's terror of public opinion highlights its relationship with the outside world – in the Civil Service and beyond.

⁷³ Security Department, 'Homosexuality and Security Vetting', 4 November 1991, XPS 445/2.

Afterword: John Kittmer, HMA Athens

The end of the sexuality bar in the Diplomatic Service marked the point at which the service finally came to terms, a quarter of a century later, with the decriminalisation of homosexuality. It had proved an unjustifiably long delay and the liberalisation, when it came, suggested at least implicitly that the service was finally catching up not just with the legal framework but also with evolving social attitudes.

Since 1992, British society has continued to advance its stance towards LGBT people and this has been reflected in a whole series of legislative changes: the equalisation of the age of consent (2001), the outlawing of discrimination in the workplace on the grounds of sexual orientation (2003), the establishment of civil partnerships for same-sex couples (2005), gay adoption rights (2005), the extension of the principle of non-discrimination to the provision of goods and services (2010), the opening up of marriage to same-sex couples (2014). Happily, in contrast to its 25-year-long refusal to accept the logic of the 1967 decriminalisation, the Diplomatic Service has, for the past twenty years, walked in close step with changing legal and social norms. This has been manifest most clearly in two areas: first, through the promotion of LGBT rights as part of the FCO's mission to support and strengthen human rights worldwide, and secondly, in the FCO's support of its own LGBT diplomats at home and overseas.

Internationally, the mainstreaming of human rights has made the promotion of LGBT rights a core part of the everyday work of British diplomats. Today's FCO 'places great importance on working to challenge violence and discrimination against LGBT people wherever it exists'.⁷⁴ The FCO's latest Human Rights report shows the range of activities underway, from challenging governments to decriminalise homosexuality, to supporting activists in civil society and to using international fora to affirm the universality of LGBT rights as human rights. The presence of UK diplomats at international Pride events is a very visible and now very common sign of the FCO's commitment. Where host governments allow it, our consular service now performs civil partnerships and same-sex marriages, drawing attention in those countries to a lack of equivalent local rights and provisions.

But the FCO's modern approach is evident not only in its global promotion of LGBT rights but in what it does to nurture and support the careers of its LGBT diplomats and staff at home and overseas. For its staff, the FCO aims to be a model employer, committed clearly to the principle of equality, irrespective of sexuality. In 2015, the FCO set a target for 6% of staff in the Senior Management Structure to be

⁷⁴ *Human Rights and Democracy: The 2015 Foreign & Commonwealth Office Report*, Cm 9245 (2016), 10.

self-identifying as LGBT by 2019. The activities of FLAGG, the successful LGBT staff association, are actively encouraged. Mentoring schemes, role modelling, regular events and networking help LGBT staff to feel valued for who they are and what they bring to modern British diplomacy. There have been steady attempts to ensure that LGBT diplomats considering foreign postings are properly supported, not least through post reports that accurately describe the realities faced by LGBT staff overseas. Heads of mission are routinely encouraged to lobby host governments for the recognition and diplomatic protection of the families of their LGBT diplomats. When, arriving at my current post in 2013, I was informed by the host government that my civil partner would be recognised as part of my family only if I named him as my 'domestic servant', I received every encouragement from the FCO in London to lobby for local change. Together with diplomats posted here from other like-minded states, I did just that and the correcting change to the lawcode was made in December 2015. All of these things are a sign that the FCO now works with the grain of its employees' identities, incidentally showing itself capable of evolving responsively to further societal change.

If I close on a personal note, it is because, at heart, the promotion of a workplace culture in which everyone is respected irrespective of their sexuality affects all of us in a profoundly personal way. This is true of my own history, as a gay man in the public service. I first applied to the Diplomatic Service when the sexuality bar was in place. The bar worried me, but other opportunities at the time intervened; I eventually joined the service after the bar had gone and attitudes were changing. I am now one of a confident number of LGBT heads of mission. In Athens in 2015, I found myself standing on a platform in front of a microphone and a crowd of many thousands at the annual Pride march. We had just heard the Greek Government announce that it would legislate for same-sex civil partnership. I delivered an impromptu message of support and encouragement. 'I too am gay and my civil partner is here with me today,' I said in Greek. 'You deserve the same rights we enjoy.' The roar I got back from the crowd was a roar of affirmation. And I knew, perhaps for the first time ever, what pride really was: pride in my country, pride in our diplomatic service and pride to be able in this public and positive way to support the international LGBT community and the human rights of all.

Appendices

Appendix 1: The first policy review following the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967

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19th December, 1967

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20 DEC 1967
DSQ ✓ 144
CABINET

COPY NO. 48
Submission done.
CEA 20/12

OFFICIAL COMMITTEE ON SECURITY

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF THE SEXUAL OFFENCES ACT, 1967

Note by the Chairman of the Personnel
Security Committee

The principal provision of the Sexual Offences Act which has implications for security is that homosexual acts between consenting male adults in private is no longer a criminal offence.

2. The Personnel Security Committee have examined, in the context of security policy, the likely effect of this change in the law upon the vulnerability of homosexuals to blackmail.

3. Existing security policy regards homosexuality as raising a prima facie presumption that an individual is unfit for employment in a post requiring positive or normal vetting (M.P.S.M., Annex 8 and Chapter 1, paragraph 8). It is based on the premise that a homosexual is vulnerable to blackmail or pressure.

4. The Committee considered that, despite the change in the law, the risk of blackmail or pressure in homosexual cases would remain very substantial for the following reasons.

5. Under the new Act, certain homosexual acts, e.g. offences against minors or importuning in public remain criminal offences; there can be no certainty that an individual with homosexual tendencies will not resort to such illegal practices and thus render himself liable to blackmail on this score. Perhaps more important is the fact that the threat of exposure to family, friends or employer is in no way reduced by the Act. Moreover homosexuality in itself still carries some social stigma.

6. The threat of prosecution abroad under local law also remains a relevant factor. The law in communist countries is almost invariably more restrictive than our own, and staff at Missions in or on visits to those countries are therefore no less liable to pressure or blackmail than before: indeed they may be more liable, since they may no longer be on their guard to conceal this aspect of their behaviour. In some allied countries including Canada and some States of the United States of America, the legal position is much the same as it previously was in the United Kingdom. This is a consideration of particular importance to departments which exchange information with these countries whose security authorities might well be critical of any significant relaxation in the United Kingdom rules in this field.

7. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the threat of exposure to the police in this country will be less effective as a ground for blackmail, and it would be right that those responsible for vetting decisions should take this into consideration. As a result they might on occasions find it possible, in the light of all other relevant information and their knowledge of the individual, to tilt the balance in his favour.

8. The Committee concluded that there was no case for any change in the general policy, but that departments should be advised that, in considering particular cases involving suspicion of homosexuality, they might sometimes find it possible to come down in favour of the individual rather more often than at present because of the lessened threat of exposure to the police in the United Kingdom.

9. In the course of their consideration of this matter, the Committee noted some ambiguity in M.P.S.M. Annex 8, which in paragraph 2(c) lists the following among the circumstances raising a presumption of unfitness for a post covered by the Positive Vetting procedure:-

"Has been or is reasonably suspected of being a homosexual or has engaged in infamous, immoral or disgraceful conduct such as might expose him to a blackmail approach by a hostile intelligence service".

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10. This wording is not entirely consistent with M.P.S.M., Chapter 1, paragraph 8(b) and might be read as implying that a homosexual is ipso facto to be regarded as unreliable. This would be a difficult position to defend, particularly in the light of the new Act. The Committee felt, therefore, that the relevant passage in Annex 8 should be revised to make it clear that a presumption of unfitness is raised by homosexuality because it makes the individual vulnerable to blackmail or pressure. The Committee accordingly recommends that Annex 8, paragraph 2(o) should be amended to read as follows:-

"Has been or is reasonably suspected of being a homosexual and therefore vulnerable to a blackmail approach or pressure by a hostile intelligence service or has engaged in infamous, immoral or disgraceful conduct such as might ^{compel} expose him to blackmail".

11. The Official Committee are invited:-

- (i) to endorse the conclusion in paragraph 8 and to agree that departments should be advised by D.E.O. letter accordingly;
- (ii) to agree that the M.P.S.M. should be amended as proposed in paragraph 10.

(Signed) N. G. Morrison

H.M. Treasury,
Great George Street,
London, S.W.1

Appendix 2: Another policy review in 1974 argues for less weight to be given to homosexuality in relation to other characteristics when considering security, but stresses no relaxation of the Bar

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RECEIVED IN
REGISTRY No. 7
30 DEC 1974
XQV 1/g

Civil Service Department
Whitehall London SW1A 2AZ
Telephone 01-839 7733 ext 1528
19 December 1974

Sir Douglas Allen GCB
Head of the Home Civil Service

R B M King Esq
Ministry of Overseas Development
Eland House
Stag Place
London SW1E 5DH

cc. Head of Security
Dept.

See 4(b) of enclosure

Dear Sir,

SENIOR PROMOTIONS: IMPLICATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

I enclose a copy of a note of our meeting on Friday 6 December. We intend to circulate this note to the Establishment Officers of the main Departments who discussed this matter at their meeting on 3 January 1974.

As regards the particular case about which you wrote to Ian Bancroft, we agreed that you could inform the individual concerned that he would be considered for promotion on equal terms with his colleagues. You would stress that this was a decision related solely to the circumstances of his particular case, and not indicative of any change in our policy towards the promotion of homosexuals.

I am assuming of course that you are satisfied that you can safely promote the man in question, despite the difference of legal position overseas and the needs of your Department to be able to send senior people abroad to many parts of the world.

I am sending copies of this letter and enclosure to Antony Part, Norman Price, Idwal Pugh, Philip Rogers, Ronnie Symonds and John Wilson; and to Tom Brimelow for information.

Yours ever,
Douglas Allen

Mr. Cates
Mr. Hutton
31/12/74
You will wish
more
K11
Ann P.C.

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SENIOR PROMOTIONS: IMPLICATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

John ② A meeting was held on Friday 6 December to discuss the general policy on the promotion of homosexuals to senior positions. Sir Douglas Allen's letter of 3 October to Sir Thomas Brimelow provided the basis for discussion.

2. Those present were:-

Sir Douglas Allen (in the chair)
Sir Antony Part
Sir Philip Rogers
Mr N C Price
Mr R B M King
Sir Idwal Pugh
Sir John Wilson
Mr R C Symonds
Mr J M Moore
Mr A Duke

3. The following factors were noted, which appeared to justify treating homosexuality differently from other character traits (eg promiscuous heterosexual activity) which could affect a man's suitability for promotion:-

- a. Certain homosexual acts were still against the law in England and Wales. In Scotland, and in a number of overseas countries, the law was even more restrictive.
- b. There was still a good deal of public prejudice against homosexuals. This could have particular relevance to promotions to senior positions outside London of considerable local standing.

4. In the course of discussion the following points were noted:-

- a. Despite the relaxations brought into effect by the Sexual Offences Act 1967, there remained a risk of blackmail in cases where a homosexual was not open about his personality trait. But there could be an equal risk of blackmail in the case of a

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person who committed adultery and concealed the fact. It was important that the risk of blackmail in homosexual cases should be looked at strictly on merits in each case.

b. It was noted that special considerations applied to the Diplomatic Service. There were countries to which known practising homosexuals could not be posted because of local laws or attitudes. It followed that such persons would not meet the Diplomatic Service mobility requirements. In these circumstances PV clearance would not be granted to a known practising homosexual.

c. In the Armed Services, homosexuality was still an offence. Because of this, it would be reasonable for the MOD to take a rather more restrictive attitude than might be necessary in most other Departments.

d. Because of various cases over the years, there was a tendency for the public mind to associate homosexuals with spy scandals. The possible need to defend publicly a decision to promote a known homosexual to an senior position was something which sensitive Departments inevitably had to have in mind.

e. PV clearance was a relevant factor to the extent that, if it could not be given, there could be no question of promotion above Assistant Secretary. But, in general, PV clearance decisions should be kept separate from management decisions associated with the suitability of individuals for particular appointments.

f. Too rigid a line giving the impression that homosexuals were virtually barred from promotion to senior posts, might induce them more often than at present to conceal their tendencies. This would operate to the general disadvantage of management and security.

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4. The general feeling of the meeting was that the discussion had pointed to a narrowing of the gap between the weight given to homosexuality and that given to other aspects of character when promotion decisions were being taken. The meeting concluded that this was not an area in which broad guidance could be given; each case must and should be looked at on merits. In cases where there was no question of any breach of the law, and where the Department was satisfied that no other difficulty was likely to arise, the Department should not feel inhibited from recommending the individual for promotion solely on account of his homosexuality. It was important however to avoid giving the impression to organisations such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality that there had been any general relaxation of policy or that homosexuality was now quite irrelevant to promotion. Where it was decided to recommend a known homosexual to CSD for promotion it should be made clear that this conclusion had been reached after consideration of the overall merits of the individual case, including the immediate and longer term employment of the individual.


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Appendix 3: An official from the Security Service (MI5) comments on lesbianism, suggesting that lesbians are less promiscuous than gay men and as a result potentially eligible for classified work in the UK

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Correspondence to this address must be under double cover. The outer envelope should be addressed to
The Secretary Box No.500 Parliament Street B.O. London SW1A 2LZ and not to any individual.

①



Box No. 500
Parliament Street B.O. London SW1A 2LZ

A B P Smart Esq
Security Department
Foreign and Commonwealth
Office

Your reference XQV 1/9

Date 7 February 1975

C 12/2

Dr. E. L. ... 13/2
Dr. H. ... 13/2
Dr. H. ... 13/2

Dr. ... 13/2

Dear Mr. Smart,

Security Significance of Lesbianism

1. Please refer to your letter of 24 December 1974 to [REDACTED] on this subject. ⑧
2. Our assessment of the significance of lesbianism has not substantially changed since the guidance enclosed with your letter was formulated in 1968. Our views are that lesbianism may make someone vulnerable to blackmail (eg: if the lesbian is married; or through fear of exposure at work), but that in general her vulnerability is probably less than that of the male homosexual. As stated in the attachment to your letter, lesbians are believed to be less promiscuous than male homosexuals and to be more inclined to establish a stable domestic set-up with a single partner. They may perhaps therefore be emotionally more stable than male homosexuals. Public opinion also tends to be less condemnatory: two women living together are much less likely to give rise to gossip than two men.
3. However, we do not consider that it would be right to assume that a lesbian is completely invulnerable to pressure, and we would not advocate any relaxation of the limitations set out in Annex 8 in this respect. There is still, prima facie, a presumption of unfitness for classified work, more particularly so where an overseas post is involved. But where there is no possibility of blackmail - if, for example, the individual has a stable relationship about which she is perfectly open, both at work and among her friends and family, it may be possible, all other things being agreed, to consider her employment on classified work in the UK. *equal*

Yours sincerely

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Appendix 4: Minute from the Assistant Head of Personnel Operations Department, which demonstrates the level of union involvement in policy debates and gives a general impression of changing attitudes at the FCO

1. In replying to the Union Side I think we should take credit for having recently made a significant improvement in our treatment of homosexuals - namely the acceptance of a distinction, so far as promotion is concerned, between officers whose immobility is forced upon them by the Administration (as in the case of a homosexual who loses his/her PV) and officers who voluntarily declare themselves immobile. Those in the former category are, as I understand it, now no longer necessarily barred from promotion before the age of 55 (as in the case referred to in paragraph 2 of Mr Grey's letter). This is a big step towards elimination of discrimination, and the Union Side should recognise it as such.

2. I do not in fact see why we should not subscribe in general terms to the Union Side's view that our aim should be to give homosexual officers a normal career subject to some limitations on their postings. I think this should be our aim. Where there may be differences between ourselves and the Union Side is over the extent of these limitations. On this, Mr Grey must surely be realistic enough to accept that there are bound to be difficulties in countries where homosexuality is illegal or socially unacceptable. (I am not sure, however, that this is as large a limitation as Mr Brighty suggests. Would not Latin America and much of Africa, SE Asia and the Far East be acceptable, as well as the OECD countries?) We do our best to accommodate officers who, for example, cannot live in hot climates for health reasons - though this is a very substantial limitation on their postability. I should have thought that we ought to aim to do the same for homosexuals.

/3.

3. The real difficulty seems to me to lie in our PV procedures. I have never understood why a self-confessed and openly declared homosexual - who could not therefore be held to blackmail for his/her sexual proclivities - should be regarded as a greater security risk than a heterosexual. Yet the PV process comes down so heavily against homosexuals who declare themselves that one cannot really blame them for lying ^{low} and hoping they will get away with it. As Mr Quantrill says, it is our own attitude which forces them into a position from which they are vulnerable to blackmail. But if they knew that they could admit to their homosexuality and still have the chance of a reasonable career in the Service they would be much more likely to come into the open about it and thus remove the potential source of blackmail. There is also the separate argument that homosexuals tend to have more transient relationships than heterosexuals and are therefore, even if they admit to their sexual preferences, more likely to become security risks. I personally doubt whether this is true. I see no reason why a self-confessed homosexual should be any greater security risk than a notorious philanderer. Yet the latter gets away with nothing more than a mild yellow tag on his file, whereas the homosexual loses his PV altogether. This seems to me unfair, and I think the whole subject needs further examination by Security Department and others concerned with a view to seeing whether we cannot move towards greater liberalisation of the regulations.

6 October 1981

M E Pellew

M E Pellew



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office