

# Out and Elected: Political Careers of Openly Gay and Lesbian Politicians in Germany and Finland

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## Abstract

How have openly lesbian and gay politicians fared in German and Finnish politics from the 1980s to the present day? The article follows anecdotally the careers of individual lesbian and gay political actors in two countries with either a mixed system of constituency voting and list voting, or an open list with multi-member districts by using newspaper and journal articles as its sources. The findings of the article challenge previous understandings about the natural connection between lesbian and gay politicians, movements and voters, as well as the most advantageous timing and ways for coming out. Whereas in both countries politician's known homosexuality has transformed from a devastating problem to a potential benefit, the article also highlights the decisive role of gender in building successful political careers as an openly homosexual politician in high-level politics, and suggests to the enduringly gendered and sexualized constructedness of politics.

Keywords: out politicians, homosexuality, gay, lesbian, Finland, Germany

In the new millennium openly homosexual politicians have become a prominently visible feature of political landscapes in many Western countries. That known homosexuality has transformed from a devastating problem for a politician's career to a potential advantage is a major change in terms of descriptive representation of homosexuals. It is indicative to the more relaxed attitude both in the media and among the voters towards non-heterosexual sexual orientations. Although prominently visible today, the increased visibility of openly homosexual politicians did not happen overnight, but is a result of a lengthy process.

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In this article I analyse how the media has addressed the open homosexuality of political candidates in high-level politics in both Germany and Finland since the 1980s. Previous research of the role of homosexuality in the political process has foremost addressed the situation in the United States from the 1990s onwards. That research has mainly focussed on the influence of the lesbian and gay movement into public policy and legislation (Riggle & Tadlock 1999), or on the distinct role of lesbian and gay constituency in the elections (Herzog 1996). Taken to the level of individual candidates – the iconic case being the elected San Francisco Board of Supervisor Harvey Milk (Shilts 2008) – such approaches could suggest that openly lesbian and gay politicians would be tightly connected to the lesbian and gay political movement, and that they would be supported mostly by lesbian and gay voters looking for political representation. Considering other contexts over time, however, challenges the validity of such assumptions, and suggests that they might need revision.

Expanding on the work of James W. Button, Kenneth D. Wald and Barbara A. Rienzo (1999), Donald P. Heider-Merkel (2010) has studied the influence of the U.S. American candidates' sexual orientation to their electoral success from the perspective of political representation. For a long time only David Rayside (1998) had analysed the political biographies of congress level gay male politicians, who all had their homosexual coming out while already in the office. He did so in some English speaking countries, namely Canada, United Kingdom, and the US. The generalisations of research done about openly gay politicians in the UK and US suffer from the fact that these countries have had a more or less rigid two-party voting system, with a winner-takes-all outcomes, and rather conservative political cultures. Hence I open up a different case by studying the multi-party system contexts in Germany, with a mixed system of constituency voting and list voting, and in Finland, with its open list multi-member districts. Unlike the previous research suggests, these contexts pose, as will be shown, electoral opportunities even for openly homosexual first-time candidates.

More recently also Andreas Heilmann (2011) has interestingly taken up the challenge of thinking through the various meanings attributed to the homosexual images of some German politicians, and the images' effects to particular political careers. Yet also Heilmann, as most of the previous research, too, has focused on gay men only. Hence the aim here is to pay attention to the ways in which gender affects the possibilities of openly homosexual politicians to thrive in their political careers. Especially the gender aspect will shed new light to the rosy progress narrative often presented in the media about the positive effects of more relaxed attitudes towards homosexuality.

In order to show how the media has treated openly homosexual politicians in Germany and Finland over time I have collected and evaluated all the articles that mention or discuss the alleged or blatant homosexuality of named

high-level politicians I was able to find, starting from the first openly gay parliamentarian in each country. For the case of Germany, most of the articles between 1982 and 2001 have been retrieved from the mainstream newspaper clippings republished in *Schwule Presseschau*, later *Lesbisch-Schwule Presseschau*. Thereafter the lesbian and gay magazine *Queer*, later *queer.de*, as well as the web archives of major German newspapers and weekly news magazines have been harvested for the source material until 2015. In Finland the clippings from the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (1984–2015) as well as the gay and lesbian periodical *SETA* (1980–94), later *Z* (1995–2007) have been used as the main sources of information.

The arguments made in this article are based on the representative anecdotes (Burke 1945) of single politicians that I have built by using all in all some 600 newspaper and magazine articles.<sup>1</sup> Each of the anecdotes focuses on the treatment of the politician in the media, often by using the information provided in several articles. When taken together, such anecdotes allow the tracing of larger attitudinal changes that have taken place, firstly, in the ways in which high-level politicians' homosexuality gets evaluated in the media and valued by other politicians and the public alike, and secondly, in the resultant possibilities that openly gay and lesbian politicians have in establishing their political careers.

In the following firstly the emergence of gay male politicians and thereafter lesbians in Germany is described. Secondly I move to discuss the Finnish cases. Thereafter the developments in both countries will be juxtaposed with each other and discussed, before entering to the conclusions about the deeply gendered nature of politics revealed when comparing the careers of out gay male politicians with those of lesbians.

## Coming Out in the Era of Blatant Homophobia

Germany was quite possibly the first country in the world in electing a known homosexual man, Herbert Rusche (b. 1952), as a first timer in to the federal parliament in 1983. Prior to that it had been common that the politicians already elected in to the parliament either chose to come out themselves (like Coos Huijsen in the Netherlands in 1977), or were forcefully outed in the media against their will (such as Gerry Studds in the U.S. in 1983).<sup>2</sup> Although Rusche secured a seat in Bundestag in 1983, due to the half term rotation principle that the Greens had decided to practice,<sup>3</sup> he took up his position in Bonn as a MP in 1985.

That German's first openly gay parliamentarian came from the Greens was not a coincidence, but a result of both push and pull factors. On the one

hand many of those who have been part of the gay and lesbian liberation movement felt more at home with the Greens than with the more traditional political parties, and on the other hand the Greens were ideologically committed to enhance the possibilities of political influence of formerly disenfranchised groups, such as homosexuals (Heilmann 2011, 86–7, esp. footnote 2.). Hence already the first openly gay lead candidate in the 1980 federal elections, Cornelius “Corny” Littmann, had been from the ranks of the Hamburger Greens.

Although Rusche himself saw his role in the parliament as a spearhead of the gay movement, he nevertheless ran in difficulties in trying to live up to that task. The Greens’ working group for gays, pederasts and transsexuals SchwuP would have liked to take a more prominent role in shaping the party line on sexual issues, since it was not pleased with Rusche’s scope of work. Whereas Rusche wanted to abolish only the § 175 (which still continued to criminalize consensual sexual deeds between men, if one of them was younger than 21 years), the activists of SchwuP wanted the party to be active in repealing also the § 176, which treated sex with minors as criminal abuse. The controversy between Rusche and SchwuP on the age of consent aggravated to the point in which Rusche decided to resign from the group altogether. In the beginning of the next legislature period pederasts were banned for good from the Greens’ gay men’s working group.

Although Rusche’s colleagues from other parties ridiculed the openly gay man at the parliamentary debates to the extent that he chose to raise that as an issue in his own parliamentary speech, and in the height of the AIDS crisis even the chauffeurs of the *Bundestag* refused to give a ride to its openly homosexual member, he would have liked to continue his work in the parliament. This, however, was not possible, since, according to the idealistic practice of the Greens of that time, experienced MPs were rotated out of the *Bundestag*. After Rusche it took the Greens almost 10 years to get the next openly gay candidate into the parliament.

The climate towards homosexuals was harsher in the more established German parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). No politician interested in advancing his own political career would have imagined in the 1980s that coming out as a homosexual would have worked towards that goal. Quite the contrary, in those parties the involuntary outing of possibly homosexual colleagues would be used instead as an effective tool to disable the careers of political rivals well into the 1990s. The practice continued despite of the infamous Kießling-Wörner affair in 1983, which already showed the extent of political harm that could be caused by homophobic overreactions.

Especially the CDU politicians were eager to bring to fall the political careers of their fellow party members, either due to their actual or alleged homo-

sexuality. In 1995 CDU's vice-party leader on a federal level, Heinz Eggert, a married man and a father of four, had to face accusations of same-sex sexual harassment. Before the police investigation could clear the reputation of the former priest, he had lost all his political positions of trust, and could retain his leading role in the party only on a state level. As he was in 1999 faced with renewed accusations, now concerning a same-sex affair with a minor, political commentators assumed this was due to CDU's internal power struggle.

Throwing homosexual dirt within one's own party was not alien to SPD politicians either. In Bavaria the leading SPD politician Dietmar Zierer was brought to fall by his own party, after the married politician once again had given his "homosexual tendencies" free range after a drunken party following a football game in 1989.

Moreover, some politicians, predominantly from the CDU, were happy to scandalize publicly the known homosexuals in other parties as well. Andreas Eckert, a young green representative in the City State of Berlin, had just become the first openly gay politician in Germany to be re-elected into his parliamentary position in 1990. Furthermore he was given the position of a second Vice-Speaker for the State Parliament. Apparently this was too much for the CDU politician Klaus-Herman Wienhold, who was able to join the forces with tabloids to fan popular outrage of the readers with the accusations that Eckert had acted as a rent boy before his political career. Although Eckert refuted the accusations, the on-going media harassment made him to lay down his position as a Vice-Speaker.

The Free Democratic Party (FDP) was traditionally considered to be more liberal and progressive in relation to the homosexual law reforms than the older parties. Yet the change of the coalition partner from the SPD to the CDU in 1982 necessitated also a more conservative take on homosexuality within the FDP. The relation of the FDP to homosexuality became even trickier from 2001 onwards, when it chose a closeted gay man, Guido Westerwelle, as its party leader.

## **Making Stakeholder Politics as a Gay Man in the 1990s**

By that time Volker Beck from the Alliance '90/The Greens got elected into the *Bundestag* in 1994, he was already a well-known gay political activist. He had started his career as a secretary for gay issues for the Greens' political fraction in Bonn, yet as the party failed the first post-unification elections in 1990, he entered the board of a newly found gay organisation the Gay Men's Federation in Germany (SVD). Initially founded in the former East Germany to join the forces of eastern gay associations, SVD, led by Beck, soon took up the contest

with the older West German Federal Association for Homosexuality (BVH) over the political leadership of Germany's gay movement and the kind of politics it was aiming at.

Beck had already in the 1980s started to talk in favour of gay marriage (*Hommo-Ehe*), and saw it as a viable political goal also for the Greens. While in the parliament, he became its most prominent advocate. Whereas Beck's initial intention was to secure gays and lesbians the same legal rights and responsibilities that married heterosexuals already enjoyed, the years to come showed how such a goal was not to be realized within Germany's political landscape. As the *Bundestag* finally voted for the *Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz* in 2001, the new law, although recognizing same-sex unions, would not treat the people entering them equal to married spouses. Although CDU failed to get the new law overruled by the Federal Constitutional Court, the parliamentarians still had to fight for full legal equalization of same-sex partners with opposite-sex partners in a piecemeal tactic over the years to come. Finally in 2010 the Federal Constitutional Court stated that the legal discrimination of same-sex partnerships in inheritance laws is against the constitution, which paved way for an attitudinal shift in other issues as well.

The processing and passing of the law on registered partnership had become possible only after the SPD had overtaken the CDU in the federal elections in 1998. Some commentators suggest that the principled opposition of the CDU to the rights of homosexuals was one of the key reasons why the electorate voted for a long overdue change, quite as in 1969, when the SPD was previously able to triumph over the CDU. The turn of the political tide in 1998 was also suggested by the mottos of the annual lesbian and gay Christopher Street Day marches in Hamburg and Berlin, which were advocating "Visible, Strong and Proud – for the Change" and pushing for "Different Kind of Politics".

Considering the political moment it did not come as a surprise that the second party to have a gay politician to out himself in *Bundestag* was the SPD. The first term MP Johannes Kahrs chose to make his move when the rumours about his alleged homosexuality, circulated by *Hinnerk*, a gay publication from his home constituency Hamburg, started to affect his work in Bonn. Kahrs came out in 1998 in an interview given to *Stern* magazine. In his interview he criticized the workplace discrimination faced by military personnel that was known to live in same-sex relationships. While taking a stand in favour of gay rights, in his interview Kahrs distanced himself from the gay movement, and referred also to himself only as someone who "is personally affected" (*persönlich Betroffen*) by the issue of homosexuality.<sup>4</sup> This decision has served him well, since he has been re-elected into *Bundestag* ever since.

## Using Respectable Homosexuality as a Political Asset

The passing of German legislation on the same-sex unions in 2001 opened a novel era of public respectability for gay and lesbian politicians. The opponents of gay politicians could no longer easily vilify them; and especially those who decided to register their partnerships would rightfully expect their personal choice to be treated with dignity also by the media. More and more public figures came out, and the aura not only of respectability but even glamour started to extend itself in the media from one openly celebrity gay figure to another, politicians not excluded.

This meant that in the early 2000's it became possible for high-ranking gay male politicians even in the more established parties to turn their homosexuality into a political asset, something that would have been unheard of some ten to fifteen years earlier. One by one prominent politicians from the SPD, CDU and FDP chose to have their public coming out.

The coming out cascade, as the German sociologist Andreas Heilmann (2011) has coined these events, started in 2001 when Klaus Wowereit (b. 1953; SPD) was running for the Mayor of Berlin. The social democrats were quite reluctantly putting forward in the race the unglamorous, unmarried Wowereit as their designated candidate. However, Wowereit launched his candidacy with a speech that was guaranteed to surprise his electorate, stating "for those who don't know it yet, I'm gay, and that's OK the way it is".<sup>5</sup> His unexpected announcement electrified the campaign immediately, and the media started speculations about how his known homosexuality would affect the race between the SPD and the CDU. The positive feedback following the announcement of the party leader eventually brought Wowereit and his party a safe first place in the elections (Wowereit 2007). Despite the fact that the SPD kept losing seats in the federal level in the years to come, the openly and blatantly gay mayor Wowereit was able to maintain the SPD's position as a leading party in two subsequent elections in Berlin, before retiring from politics in 2014.

Similarly the Mayor of Hamburg, Ole von Beust (b. 1955; CDU), was able to profit politically from his coming out (von Beust and Lopez 2012). He called in a press meeting in 2003 to inform the media that he has just dismissed his coalition partner Roland Schill for trying to blackmail him. Schill had insinuated that the mayor had an affair with and was favouring the Justice Senator of Hamburg, Roger Kusch, both of which von Beust firmly thrust aside. Although Kusch used the Schill affair as an opportunity to come out as a gay man, a more reserved von Beust resolutely refused to discuss his own sexual inclinations. Hence it was von Beust's own father, a former politician himself, who chose to out his own son in an interview granted

for a conservative newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*. Politically von Beust's robust action towards Schill meant, however, that early elections had to be held in 2004. After the elections CDU had gained a majority in the city state parliament, whereas the populist party led by Schill failed to get a single seat. Quite like Wowereit in Berlin, as a known homosexual von Beust was able to renew his success in a subsequent election in Hamburg, before retiring from politics in 2010.

Guido Westerwelle (b. 1961), the party leader of the FDP, chose for his part to have his coming out at the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party of the Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2004, which he attended accompanied by his partner Michael Mronz (Satar 2009). Unlike the politically motivated coming out of Wowereit and von Beust, Westerwelle's coming out was framed as a private issue, which put the emphasis of the news reporting on a male politician's love relationship with a good-looking younger man. Unlike his predecessors, who received overwhelmingly positive feedback for their coming out while keeping their partners out of sight, Westerwelle's decision was greeted with mockery and suspicion. It took quite some time for Westerwelle to learn to manage his public gay image and relationship to his benefit. Also in this case the openly gay party leader was able to increase the vote for his party in the next elections to come, and eventually into the party's all-time high of 14,6 per cent in 2009. Unlike Wowereit and von Beust, Westerwelle did not step back from the politics soon enough, and so he was also to witness how his party bitterly failed the five per cent threshold by 0,2 per cent in the 2013 elections.

Andreas Heilmann suggests that the homosexual politicians' acceptance equals a probation order: homosexual politicians are accepted by the general public and supported by the voters only under the condition that they behave according to the given (heterosexual) rules of respectability (Heilman 2011). Hence it is no wonder that the successful high-ranking gay politicians are not only the beneficiaries of the new gay respectability, but also its poster boys.

It is noteworthy that the political climate with regard to out homosexual politicians did not suffer a backlash in 2005, when Gerhard Schröder (SPD) lost the federal elections to Angela Merkel, the leader of the CDU since 2000. Born and raised in the East Germany Merkel was less affiliated with and influenced by the catholic wing of the Union, and as a woman she was less prone to homophobia than some of her male colleagues in the party. As a Chancellor she was also the one to appoint Westerwelle as the first out gay Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, and under her reign the first gay MPs also in the CDU have finally been able to come out.



## Lesbian Feminist in the *Bundestag*

The first out lesbian to gain a seat in the *Bundestag* was Jutta Oesterle-Schwerin (b. 1941; Schwerin 2012). Born and raised in Israel, she moved to live in Germany in 1962. At the time of her candidacy the divorced mother of two had been living together with her female partner already for eight years. Although not particularly closeted, the Green parliamentarian became prominently out lesbian only after separating from her female partner and moving to Bonn in 1987.

Oesterle-Schwerin was the first MP to actively promote lesbian politics in the Greens. She founded a national working group for lesbians in a party that so far had only had gays' and women's working groups. She was also closely affiliated with Lesbenring, a lesbian association founded in 1982, which eventually became under her lead the lesbian counterpart for the gay men's national alliance BVH. The political goals of Lesbenring were strongly geared towards lesbian liberation and independence, for which increased lesbian visibility was seen as a crucial first step.

As a MP Oesterle-Schwerin was consequently visible as lesbian and actively promoting lesbian and gay issues – to the extent that a new keyword, homosexuality, had to be added to the register of parliamentary affairs. Moreover, she was introducing lesbian feminist critique of the heterosexist society into the parliamentary debates, speaking for example against compulsory heterosexuality in general and marriage as an oppressive institution for women in specific. Unlike Volker Beck she was thus not advocating for marriage, but promoting equal treatment of all kind of living arrangements or *Lebensformenpolitik*, as it was called in German.

Such disruptive activities did not remain unnoticed by her fellow MPs from the CDU, who looked for ways to slow her down. In 1988 Fritz Wittmann raised his discontent to the President of *Bundestag* Phillippp Jenninger, focusing in his address especially on the use of such inappropriate words as gay (*Schwul*) and lesbian (*Lesbe*) in the honourable house of the parliament.<sup>6</sup> These particular words, launched by the contemporary lesbian and gay movement, were thereafter banned from the parliamentary proceedings. Oesterle-Schwerin obviously fought such censorship, since she saw that it was repudiating lesbians' and gays' right for self-definition. While refusing to use the acceptable deemed words *Homosexual* and *Lesbierin*, she put forward a proposal that addressed the decline of human and civil rights in Great Britain for *Uringe* and *Urninde*. As Volker Beck had discovered, Karl-Heinrich Ulrichs, a pioneer of the homosexual movement in the 1860s, had invented the neologisms leaning on the name of the Greek god Uranus, after which *Uringe* and *Urninde* had been used as self-definitions for male and female homosexuals. The censorship

of acceptable wording – and likewise acceptable way of life, and politics – with regard to lesbians and gays was eventually dropped discretely in the following legislature period.

Whereas Oesterle-Schwerin and Beck were able to join forces in this conceptual matter, Oesterle-Schwerin's unapologetic stand on lesbian feminist politics created friction with the party's gay working group lead by Beck. Although Oesterle-Schwerin would have wanted to make use of her newly won experience in the parliament and to run also for the next election, the now openly lesbian candidate was no longer granted a promising enough place on the voting list in her own constituency. Hence the lesbians in Bavaria intervened and were able to secure her a decent list place in their constituency. The count of the final vote showed, however, that the Greens from the West Germany had altogether failed the five per cent threshold in the 1990s federal elections.

However, for the 1990s election, the first after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the electorate had been divided to east and west. In Eastern Germany the Alliance 90, which collaborated with the Greens in the west, managed to secure eight seats for the *Bundestag*. One of them was won by Christina Schenk (b. 1952), an openly lesbian feminist who had been a representative of the Independent Women's Association at the innovative Central Round Table discussions prior the elections.

The new parliamentarian Schenk was supported in her tasks by Oesterle-Schwerin, who remained in Bonn as an assistant for the Greens. Both lesbians shared similar radical feminist family politics, which aimed at dismantling the privileges granted for married spouses. Such politics were in distinct opposition to the more assimilationist politics favoured mostly by gay men. This might have been one of the reasons why the independent Schenk – unlike the Greens' party member Volker Beck – was not offered a promising enough position at the Greens' voting list for the 1994 elections.

Without further ado Schenk switched the party and became an independent candidate for the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), formerly prominent in the east. When gaining a seat in the 1994 elections she became the first openly homosexual politician to be re-elected into the *Bundestag*. In the PDS she was actively promoting not women's but feminist politics, and gender and sexual equality, including the right for adoption for lesbians and gays, and the right of self-determination both for intersexed people and transsexuals.

After the 1998 elections the PDS became the first party to have simultaneously two openly homosexual politicians in the parliament, as also Sabine Jünger (b. 1973) joined *Bundestag*. Yet in the 2001 elections it was PDS's turn to fail the threshold. Although this meant an end for Schenk's and Jünger's political careers, leaving parliamentary politics opened new opportunities for

Schenk's personal life. Unburdened by a political office, he felt eventually that it was possible for him to come out as a transman. Christian Schenk, now a married heterosexual man, though still a feminist, has not chosen to return to party politics.<sup>7</sup>

### Can Out Lesbians Succeed in German Politics?

Whereas out lesbians had by the mid-1990s been elected into the parliament both from the Greens and the PDS, the two youngest parties of the German *Bundestag*, this has not been possible in any of the older parties. The fate of an independent politician, Helga Schuchardt (b. 1939; former FDP), could, nevertheless, have suggested differently. In 1992 Schuchardt was appointed as a Minister of Culture in Lower Saxony, when the tabloid *Bild* outed her, not as a lesbian (that word never was used), but as someone who was living together with another woman, while still married to her husband. Although *Bild* tried to scandalize the fact that Schuchardt was together with Inge Volk, her former public relations officer from the time when she was still appointed to the Senator of Culture in Hamburg, nobody was really interested. Neither the Prime Minister of Lower Saxony, Gerhard Schröder (SPD), nor Schuchardt's husband, nor Schuchardt herself were to be agitated about media's revelation of a state of affairs that had been going on for already seven years by then. Hence Schuchardt's political standing remained quite unaffected by the outing. The utter failure of such a revelation to cause political damage may explain why this involuntary outing of a lesbian politician remained a singular event in the German media landscape.

Yet other female politicians, who had chosen to divorce their husbands while still in office, faced more severe problems in their political careers within the SPD. After announcing publicly that their new partner is a woman, they were invariably confronted with the fact that the party moved them down the constituency's voting list, all the way below the water mark. This happened in 1999 to Kirstin Fusan-Freese (b. 1962), who by then had already twice held a position as a Minister of Family Affairs in Pankow, a constituency in the city-state of Berlin, and again to Lissy Gröner (b. 1954), when list places were dealt for the 2009 EU elections, although by that time Gröner had functioned as a MEP in her constituency of Upper Bavaria already for twenty years. Yet the news about these women's no longer heterosexual orientation was enough to interrupt their prospect suitability as political representatives in the eyes of their fellow party members. These anecdotes challenge the experimental findings of Ewa Golebiewska (2003), who has suggested that lesbian politicians fare better off than gay men when coming out after having established their political careers.

The compromising of heterosexual assumptions concerning high-ranking female politicians would cause similar disdain also among the followers of the CDU. That the well-liked, unmarried CDU Minister of Culture in Baden-Württemberg Annette Schavan had been spotted walking along the lakeside of Bodensee with another woman became the kernel of an alleged lesbian gossip that was eagerly spread by the leading male politicians of the CDU – and quite conveniently only two weeks before the vote for the state’s party leader was due in 2004. Although Schavan called the bluff and refuted any lesbian allegations, her popularity had already been adversely affected, and she chose to back up from the race.

Three years later, in 2007, the Prime Minister of Hesse, CDU’s Roland Koch, was appalled to learn through tabloid press *Bild* that his vice, the Minister of Culture Karin Wolff (b. 1959), had shown up publicly in a summer party together with her newfound female partner. Although Koch refused to renew her position as a Minister after the forthcoming election, Wolff was able to sustain her seat in the state parliament, and, despite of Koch’s dismay, even to better her vote in the elections thereafter.

Considering that there have been several out gay male MPs in the FDP, it is remarkable that the party has no openly lesbian politicians to show, and not even rumours about lesbian politicians have made it to the press. That out lesbians from the FDP have yet to make it to the federal parliament or any other high-profile positions, raises a host of questions about the party culture within FDP, and suggests that there might be further issues with gender imbalance and anti-feminism as well.

It is quite significant that during the new millennium only the Greens’ have made it possible for openly lesbian politicians to enter the *Bundestag*. It must be noted, however, that the three green lesbians who have made it to a MP in 2002–09 are a very different slant from Jutta Oesterle-Schwerin’s or Christina Schenk’s radical feminism of the 1980s and 1990s. The more current lesbians rather choose to downplay their sexual orientation and to treat it strictly as a private matter, instead of a political one. They are also happy to deepen their respective political competences in other nominated areas than lesbian politics. Hence they have not promoted lesbian politics in the *Bundestag*, but rather understand gay politics as Volker Beck’s designated domain only. Merely the fifth green lesbian MP, Ulle Schauws (b. 1966), who entered the *Bundestag* in 2013 as the seventh openly lesbian MP in its history, has again geared her political attention towards lesbian politics.

Downplaying lesbian politics within the Greens might be linked to the fact that the party has matured to the extent that it can now be trusted with governmental power. This means that inconspicuous lesbians could, in the best of cases, be trusted even with an office as a Minister. This has already happened on the state level to a green MP Anja Hajduk (b. 1963), who was appointed

to a Minister of Environment and City Planning in Hamburg in 2008. Similarly MP Barbara Hendriks (b. 1952) from the SPD received a post as the Federal Minister of Environment after the 2013 elections. Although a MP since 1994, she chose to make her coming out public only once she had secured her ministerial office. Contrary to the huge debate that the nomination of the first openly gay Minister Westerwelle generated in the media in 2009, only four years later the brief note about the existence of female Minister's same-sex partnership made it hardly as a mention to the lesbian press.

### Openly Gay and Lesbian Politicians in Finland

Whereas in Germany the first out gay and lesbian politicians entered the *Bundestag* already in the 1980s, in Finland politicians remained deeply closeted throughout the 1990s, with the notable exception of Juha Föhr (b. 1958). Well-known as a television weatherman for the public broadcasting company YLE he was asked to run for the local elections in Helsinki by a small and mostly liberal Swedish People's Party of Finland. Without much of a campaign he got a waiting place from the 1992 local elections, and some offices of trust. He continued to attend party meetings, and spoke there for example for legalizing registered partnerships, a topic heatedly debated in Finland since a proposition to that effect was put forward by a leftist MP Outi Ojala in 1993.

Also in Finland the public discussion about registered partnerships started to awaken public interest about homosexuality in general, and about the possible homosexuality of public figures in particular. Hence the private life of Juha Föhr became a source not just of curiosity, but also of rumours, gossip and jokes with less pleasant homosexual innuendo. Föhr fought long to maintain his privacy, stating in a 1995 interview that "my sexuality should matter only to those, whom it affects", but in spring 1996 he eventually attended a television talk show, in which he came out as a gay man.

Thereafter Föhr continued to raise quite some eyebrows when giving further interviews dressed, for example, in a black leather outfit. Since the Swedish People's Party of Finland would not assign him to run for the European Parliament, he switched in 1996 over to the Greens in order to do so. His unruly public image did not convince the electorate in that election, but in local elections he got a seat for the Greens in Helsinki. He left the politics when the direct votes in 1999 elections did not grant him a seat in *eduskunta* either.

Considering the gauntlet Juha Föhr had to run because of his rumoured homosexuality, it becomes more understandable why the leader of the Green League, Pekka Haavisto (b. 1958), chose to remain deeply closeted throughout the 1990s. Yet the rumours about his alleged homosexuality had appar-

ently caught up with him, since the party leader, rather surprisingly for many, could not renew his seat at the 1995 parliamentary elections. He was, however, trusted by the social democratic Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen with the tasks of the Minister of Environment, making in 1995 Haavisto the first ever green politician with a Minister post. Yet the closeted Haavisto failed a seat again in 1999 elections.

When the law on registered partnership was passed in Finland, Haavisto was among those who soon took advantage of the new possibility. In 2002 he registered his ongoing relationship with Antonio Flores, a Guatemalan man he had met already in 1997. His constituency supported him for his coming out by granting him first a seat in local elections in 2005, and thereafter also in parliamentary elections in 2007. Haavisto has been able to renew his political offices ever since.

Haavisto was, however, not the first openly gay man to enter the *eduskunta*. This honour went to a young green politician Oras Tynkkynen (b. 1977) in 2004, when he became a successor for Satu Hassi, who took up an office as a MEP. Within four months in his new post the first openly gay MP Tynkkynen had given some 40 interviews for the media, which for a country of the size of Finland is quite an achievement. As a MP he has been vocal not only in climate issues, which is his field of expertise, but also in LGBT human rights issues. Although not publicly in a relationship himself, he has also been persistently putting forward propositions to equal marriage, something that the parliament eventually, after a citizen's initiative with 166 851 signatures, voted for in 2014.<sup>8</sup> After having been re-elected twice, Tynkkynen chose not to run again for the 2015 elections.

In Finland the amount of openly gay or lesbian MPs doubled from two to four in 2011 elections, when the third openly gay man, Jani Toivola (b. 1977), also from the Green League, entered *eduskunta*. He did that together with the first openly lesbian Silvia Modig (b. 1976) from the Left Alliance. It is worth noticing that Toivola, whose father came from the same village in Kenya as Barack Obama's, was also the first black man to be elected as a MP in Finland. Likewise Modig embodied features of multiple marginalisation, being not just a lesbian but also a Swedish speaking Finn with a modest socio-economic background. In addition, Toivola and Modig both shared experience in working as television hosts for youth programmes, and were thus especially good in attracting young voters. It turned out that many of those were rather concerned about the conservative backlash the populist party of the Finns was predicted to generate. The election results exceeded in this respect all worries as the Finns were able to raise the amount of their seats from former 5 to 39 (out of 200), which was an all-time gain in Finnish political history.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the first gay MP Tynkkynen received wide and overwhelmingly positive public coverage in the media, the first out lesbian MP Silvia Modig

was not treated equally fair. Both the existence of her registered partnership, and later its dissolution, were treated as tabloid worth news. Likewise her clothing style, ranging from casual to mannish and to tailored yet recycled, got easily more coverage than her political goals or achievements. However, as a skilled media persona she was able without difficulty to convince her constituency, quite like Toivola, so they both were re-elected to the *eduskunta* also in the 2015 elections.

The polarized parliamentary elections in 2011, in which the nationalist Finns gained the landslide vote, help paradoxically also to explain some of Pekka Haavisto's success in the Presidential elections that took place the following year. Many people who were upset about the strong presence of often homophobic and xenophobic the Finns in the parliament, were eager to set a sign with their vote in the following elections. What would have been more appropriate for that than giving a vote to an openly gay candidate with a migrant as his spouse? Pekka Haavisto, as a political figure, was also able to please a surprisingly wide electorate. As a gay man he had already greatly benefited from the publicity groundwork done by Juha Föhr and Oras Tynkkynen. The contrast offered to the leathered flamboyance of Föhr and the more pronounced gay political activism of Tynkkynen and Toivola allowed him to appear in public as a respectable statesman with a more general human rights agenda. Haavisto's political career also benefitted from the work of those legislators who had made it possible for the law on registered partnership to pass, since now he could present himself as a respectably partnered spouse. He had also been able to introduce his partner to the media at the televised Independence Day reception hosted by the President of Finland Tarja Halonen, where the well-dressed same-sex couple was able to strike a very solid and convincing public figure. Hence it may not have been quite as big of a surprise after all that the presidential candidate Haavisto made it to the second round, and was able to collect 37,5 per cent, or 1 077 425 of the given direct votes.

## **Running as a Homosexual Politician in Germany and Finland**

Although theoretically all people have the same right to stand for elections regardless their sexual orientation, homosexuals, unlike heterosexuals, have factually been able to do so as openly gay men and lesbians only after homosexual deeds have been legalized. In both Germany and Finland this happened in roughly the same time, in 1969 and 1971 respectively. Yet this alone has not been enough for gay men and lesbians to embark successful political careers, but also other changes had need to happen before they have been able to follow their heterosexual peers to political offices.

Most crucially the public image of homosexuality had to be thoroughly revised. Before the onset of lesbian and gay movement in the 1960s and 1970s homosexuality appeared in the tabloids only in connection with sordid sex and crime news. The lesbian and gay movement changed that image by putting forward people who demanded and deserved equal rights, regardless their sexual orientation. One of the important gains of the movement was an awareness about the need of anti-discrimination measures.

In both Germany and Finland it were women who took up the burden of making public high-profile work place discrimination cases. In Germany it was Cornelia Scheel (b. 1963), the adoptive daughter of the former President of Germany Walter Scheel, who was dismissed from the Cancer Society founded by her mother after her relationship with an actor Hella von Sinnen became public. Scheel could not even take her case to the court, since in 1991 in Germany there existed no anti-discrimination clauses to protect her. In Finland the executive director of a publishing company decided to fire the Editor in Chief Johanna Korhonen (b. 1968) in 2008, after he was informed that Korhonen was living in a registered partnership with another woman. Korhonen for her part could successfully fight her dismissal, thanks to the adequate legislation. After having gone through all the instances she was granted compensation both for illegal dismissal and discrimination due to sexual orientation.

Although anti-discrimination legislation is an important political gain, it seems that the fight for and the achievement of the right to register one's same-sex partnership overshadows it in terms of raising public awareness of and acceptance towards homosexuality. The law to that effect was passed both in Germany and Finland in 2001. Since then it has most effectively brought homosexuals to the realm of acceptable citizens, and thus also framed them anew as acceptable political actors.

It should be remembered that as late as in the 1980s and 1990s German tabloids still routinely fuelled moral panics around homosexuality among their readers, while also happily scandalizing homosexual politicians if given a slightest opportunity to do so. Similar practice was not that common in Finland, possibly because in general media reporting was more reserved about homosexuality. This was partly due to a Finnish version of a gay propaganda law, which between 1971 and 1999 criminalized the encouragement to (as such legal) homosexual deeds.<sup>10</sup> Hence much of the media overreacting that was going on in Germany with regard to homosexuality already in the 1980s or early 1990s happened in Finland belatedly.

Whereas outing helped markedly to shift the political landscape in terms of openness in the U.S. and Great Britain in the early 1990s (Gross 1993), it is interesting to notice how involuntary outing of politicians did not took up at all in either of the countries under scrutiny. In the absence of outing homosexual politicians could rather freely choose their own time and means for



their coming out. In Germany the first openly lesbian and gay politicians did that already in the 1980s within the Greens, a party that deemed lesbian and gay grassroots activists as fit political representatives as any. After the Greens the leftist PDS was the second party to open its voting lists for out lesbians.

It is interesting to notice how in Finland the corresponding parties, and even in the same order, helped the first elected out gays and a lesbian to enter the parliament. It may be due to the fact that in both countries the green and leftist parties are rather small, which makes it easier to build within them a consensus about lesbian and gay rights as human rights. This helps to create not only a more welcoming environment for the out politicians, but also a more congruent and credible profile of the party for those, who as voters value equal rights as a vital issue.

The green and the leftist parties are also relatively young in both countries, and were, especially in Germany, side-lined in the opposition when forming a government. This meant that the politicians in those parties might not have harboured hopes for particularly high political positions. Hence one could assume that the political wrangling over the places and positions in the voting lists might be less fierce in them than it is in more established parties. Add to that also idealistic considerations, and one ends up with a greater variety of persons to be considered as viable candidates.

Nonetheless it is quite remarkable that Germany had an edge of some two decades over Finland in terms of openly homosexual representation within parliamentary politics. Part of the explanation is that in Germany there were in the 1970s and 1980s strong gay and lesbian movements that included radical feminists. It solidly backed up activists who were willing to exercise political influence within the Greens. The pressure that these movements were able to create for the party meant that open lesbians and gays were granted high enough positions in the voting lists, which consequently allowed them to enter the *Bundestag*. Yet higher political posts, such as a leadership of a party or a position as a minister, have in both countries been achieved mostly only through a long political career from within a closet.

In contrast to Germany, in Finland both the feminist and the lesbian and gay movement were more conformist (Bergman 2002). Both movements preferred moderate approaches when posing their issues to political parties, rather than confronting them with radical demands and in-your-face tactics. Moreover, a victory in the open list electoral system of Finland relies not on a promising position in a voting list but on attracting personal votes locally. It means that external pressure on parties would show little direct influence on the final selection of elected MPs. Hence openly lesbian and gay candidates can succeed only after a large enough portion of the electorate has already gotten accustomed to the idea of an openly homosexual political representation, and can envision lesbians and gays as suitable political representatives either despite of

or because of their sexual orientation. As already mentioned, much of the public debate necessary for normalizing homosexuality and making it visible as a more nuanced phenomena took place in Finland much later than in Germany.

While the younger parties in both countries have been welcoming to openly gay and lesbian candidates, the older parties have proven to be a lot tougher ground for them. Since these parties are often more sizeable, they are also more diverse, which makes reaching consensus on controversial issues, such as lesbian and gay rights, less likely. Within a party the opposition to such topics can also be not just intense but also rather insulting, making a coming out to a less pleasant option. The older parties are by their historical nature also more traditional and conservative, and often also more religiously oriented than the younger ones. This further complicates the situation for potential lesbian and gay candidates. Also the internal fight for influential positions in such parties is fiercer, for which the 1990s' homophobic smear campaigns in Germany attest.

It is noteworthy, however, how influential party leaders of some older parties, such as the Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD) or the Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen (SPD) have since the 1990s pushed forward more equal politics with regard to homosexual rights. Likewise influential female politicians in both countries, namely the President Tarja Halonen (SDP) and Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) have publicly shown their support for openly homosexual politicians. This has further helped lesbian and gay politicians openly to question the homophobic business-as-usual of a male political status quo.

By now openly gay male candidates have made it to MPs in all the parties represented in the *Bundestag*. Interestingly similar openness has been possible for lesbians only in the smaller and younger parties. So far in Finland openly gay men and a lesbian have made it to the *eduskunta* only from the younger parties, but not from any of the more traditional ones.<sup>11</sup> This discrepancy sheds new light to the question, who, when and where can be seen as a fit representative and a viable political actor.

### Successful Political Careers – What's Gender Got to Do with It?

Openly gay men have now reached the position of a viable political actor, at least in the political parties present in the *Bundestag*. Their success can also be retraced to the recent changes in political publicity. Whereas the ideological differences between political parties have become increasingly less pronounced in the eyes of the voters, the individual characteristics of politicians, and the distinctiveness of those features, has gained more and more value in election campaigns (Herkman 2011, 118–120).<sup>12</sup> Homosexuality, in its exceptionality, used to be a very well marketable political asset for gay men. For example

Klaus Wowereit, who before his campaign start was seen as a dull and uninspiring candidate for the Mayor of Berlin, transformed to an unstoppable political brand, fabulously compatible with the trendy and open-minded Berlin. Similar charm was lent to Ole von Beust in Hamburg, and even Volker Beck has risen to the lead candidate of his party in his own constituency.

In a blatantly heterosexual political landscape open homosexuality not only has a high visibility factor, but seems to help the candidates to profile themselves with very little effort as fearless, decisive and modern, too. Such attributes are the ones many voters feel attracted to, and when giving their vote to such a candidate it is as if some of that star dust would fall on them, too (Engel 2009, 42–3, 54–6, 138). That voting for a gay candidate simultaneously means supporting a good cause of gay rights, is a bonus which inserts yet an additional feel-good factor to the deed. Consequently it would be hard to imagine how today a candidate's or MP's known homosexuality could be still used as a tool to harm his political career. The tide has turned to the extent that a politician to display overt homophobia would more likely cause harm to his own political career than to anyone open about his own homosexuality.

Also the novelty factor has favoured gay male politicians, since they have most likely been the first ones to come out in their respective offices, often higher ones, and by doing that have been able to generate more press than their lesbian counterparts to follow. When openly lesbian politicians have made it to the media, they are more likely to receive not only less, but also less persistent publicity, and often times the one they have been afforded to has been more sexist and less approving than that of the gay male politicians – quite in accordance to female politicians in general (Lukoschat 1995; O'Neill and Savigny 2014). The fact that openly lesbian politicians do not get positive visibility and support from the media, helps to establish and maintain a downward spiral: the smaller amount of high profile examples of successful lesbian politicians results in less likelihood to attract followers for those who already have made it.

The lack of positive media echo is directly reflected in the lack of uncomplicated success stories for high-profile lesbian politicians, the kinds which the gay male politicians can show off. When looking at the lesbian turnover rate in the *Bundestag*, one notices that it is a lot higher than among the gay men. Of the 13 openly gay men having held a seat in *Bundestag*, apart from a first-timer only two have not been re-elected, whereas all ten others have continued their political careers through re-elections (at least as long as their party has made the threshold, the failure of which sent four of them back home), leaving 6 of them still in the office. At most an openly gay MP with a seat has been re-elected for 5 legislature periods, another for 4. In contrast of those 7 openly lesbians who have held a seat in *Bundestag*, apart from a first-timer two were not re-elected, and one was re-elected only once before departing from office.

The most any out lesbian has been re-elected is twice, the mark of which have been made by three MPs. One of them had to switch her a party in order to re-run at all, and left the parliament due to her party failing the threshold. The second was allocated a futile list place from her party for the upcoming re-election. The only remaining one has been absent from the *Bundestag* between her second and third legislature periods due to a Minister post in the state level. The only out lesbian to make it to 5 re-elections remained closeted until achieving that mark, and is hence not included into this count. It can be noted how the few out lesbians have in comparison a remarkably higher likelihood for shorter, unstable or ruined careers than their gay male counterparts also in a range of other political offices.

A similar gendered discrepancy in political offices for out gay males and lesbians in both Germany and Finland (where there has been only one out and elected lesbian politician ever), suggests the presence of parallel gendered exclusionary mechanisms as well. The marked gender discrepancy between successful out gay male and lesbian politicians suggests that politics has continued to be, after more than 100 years of women's suffrage, a highly male dominated field of action. Unlike for men, for women it has also remained a dangerously heterosexist and hence a high-risk terrain, in which female politicians, and out lesbians in particular, have an exceptional hard time to sustain themselves. This continues to make it difficult for out lesbians to take full advance of executing their allegedly existing political rights.

It must be noted that the current, and rightfully so positively welcomed normalisation and ordinariness of homosexuality within politics (Browne and Bakshi 2013) might nevertheless have adverse effects to the future political careers of lesbians. The openly gay politicians, particularly in the more conservative parties, who currently have comfortable seats in the *Bundestag*, were able to reach their present strength greatly due to the positive public visibility granted to homosexuality by the momentum which was fuelled by the German coming out cascade. Yet by now in German media landscape a politician's homosexual orientation has become a no-news item. It is unlikely to be highlighted separately, and in recent interviews it gets mentioned only in bypassing. While such normalisation makes coming out less of an issue, it diminishes also the previous benefit of public distinctiveness it used to have.

Looking at the situation in the German *Bundestag* it seems unlikely that the kind of relaxed ordinariness that male homosexuality now enjoys in the politics would by itself trickle down to benefit openly lesbian politicians as well. It seems that it becomes a lot more difficult for lesbian politicians to generate positive media buzz than it used to be for gay men. Similarly any public attempts to lesbian normalizing seem to result only in making lesbians less visible as lesbians, and thus redundant as such. In a political landscape that regards homosexuality as an issue no longer in need of addressing, the question

remains: what would it take for lesbian politicians to generate also for them a momentum of positive lesbian visibility, which would also enhance their political credibility so that more of them could get elected into the parliaments? The question remains vital, since in absence of out lesbians representative politics threatens to remain an exclusively sexist and also blatantly heterosexist field of action. That would hardly benefit the democratic impetus of the political system in a pluralist society.

## Endnotes

- 1 The full list of articles can be found in Juvonen 2015, 383–401.
- 2 Please see the listing about openly lesbian and gay politicians provided by Andrew Reynolds at LGBT Representation and Rights Research Initiative. <http://globalstudies.unc.edu/lgbt-representation-and-rights-research-initiative>.
- 3 According to the half term rotation every parliamentarian was allowed to sit only for half of a period in the parliament as to allow direct political participation for a more diverse group of candidates.
- 4 Schneuer, Bettina: "Das rüttelt sich zurecht!". *Stern* 23.9.1999
- 5 "Aber damit auch keine Irritationen hochkommen, liebe Genossinnen und Genossen; ich sag's euch auch, und wer's noch nicht gewusst hat: Ich bin schwul - und das ist auch gut so, liebe Genossinnen und Genossen!" Wowereit at the party conference to his nomination in 10.6.2001. See e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ucd40hLbt7Y>.
- 6 This case has been closely followed and analyzed by linguist Louise F. Pusch (1999)
- 7 Using the name Christina when discussing Christian Schenk's earlier political career is done in agreement with Schenk.
- 8 The revised marriage law is scheduled to come to an effect in 2017.
- 9 Seats gained by party in Parliamentary elections in 1983–2015. Statistics Finland, see [http://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/2015/evaa\\_2015\\_2015-04-30\\_tau\\_001\\_en.html](http://www.stat.fi/til/evaa/2015/evaa_2015_2015-04-30_tau_001_en.html).
- 10 Chapter 20, § 9:2 of the Penal Law.
- 11 Note, however, that in December 2015 the first gay MP from the traditionally conservative Centre Party of Finland, Markku Rossi, came out through registering his relationship. He did that only after having been publicly paired with his longtime partner by a television journalist.
- 12 The same argument has been posed by von Beust in Baumbach, Marie v.: Ole von Beust: Man lebt in einer Scheinwelt. *Planet Interview* 13.8.2012.

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