

Lord Browne of Madingley, Speaking Notes

Arup Connect Out Lecture

29 May 2012 | London

[2000 words]

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

It is a very great privilege to be here.

This is the first time that I have spoken publicly about sexuality in the workplace. For most of my career, a meeting like this would have been impossible.

But over the last 50 years we've made remarkable strides.

We have equality in the workplace.

We have civil partnerships.

And more fundamentally, the seeds of change sowed by a group of people in the 60s and 70s are now bearing fruit.

Up and down the country, people of all generations know someone who is gay. And they can see that they are no different from the straight people they know.

They have the same ambitions and desires. They have the same fears and insecurities. They have the same ability to love and to laugh.

Today, looking out across so many welcoming faces, it's striking how much has changed. It really is a great pleasure to be here.

Today I want to tell you a little about my own experience as a gay man in business, before discussing the progress we've made, and the practical steps we still need to take to create a truly inclusive workplace.

I was at boarding school in Cambridgeshire when I realised I was gay. That was Britain in 1960 and homosexuality was illegal. Men went to prison. Boys were expelled. No one talked about it; individuals would just disappear leaving hushed whispers.

While I was at Cambridge the law was changed. But homosexuality was still seen as wrong, and I was still terrified of being found out.

After Cambridge, when I joined BP as a graduate, it was immediately obvious to me that it was unacceptable to be gay in business, and most definitely the oil business.

It was a very macho and sometimes homophobic environment. I felt I had to conform.

I thought I could protect my secret as long as I was careful about whom I trusted.

My mother, whom I dearly loved, rejected any discussion of my sexuality, as many parents do. With her background of being persecuted she was sure that the same would happen to me.

After all, that is what she had seen in Auschwitz.

So I made BP my family, I dedicated myself to my work and I shut out my other life.

That devotion to BP brought me success. I got promoted quickly, and travelled round the world.

By the time I became CEO, I had taken BP's exploration to every corner of the globe, from Colombia to Indonesia.

I was doing business with Russian oligarchs, Arabian princes and Silk Road dictators.

I was negotiating with Putin and Qaddafi, presenting myself as BP, but not as the complete John Browne.

And I was leading the largest takeovers ever done, of some of the world's greatest oil companies, including Amoco and Arco.

During my time, we transformed BP from a two-pipeline company, into the 3rd largest company in the world.

Being gay didn't harm my career.

But hiding my sexuality did make me unhappy and, in the end, it didn't work.

People guessed, and it only a matter of time before it came out. I realise now that the people we dealt with certainly knew I was gay. Putin had files on everybody.

But at the time, I was trapped by the fear of exposure.

In fact, I was trapped for most of my adult life, unable to reveal who I was to the world. I led a double-life of deep secrecy, and of deep isolation, walled off from those closest to me.

But today, much has changed, and a wonderful idea is in ascendance.

I think that idea is captured best by the poet C. P. Cavafy. I first read his work in New York in 1973. He was gay and in the closet. He wrote:

*“From all I did and all I said
let no one try to find out who I was.
Later, in a more perfect society,
someone else made just like me
is certain to appear and act freely.”*

At the time, I wanted to agree with that, but I never thought it would apply to me.

Today, it does.

Society, at least in our country, has reached a stage when individuals can openly be themselves.

In the course of a generation, there has been a grand social transformation, started in Greenwich Village, New York, and catalysed by the incredible work of activists like Stonewall and HRC.

That’s why we can meet here today. Why we can walk down the street with our partners. And why we have the support of every major political party in our struggle for equality.

[pause]

Much has changed in society.

And that has fed through to business, where the case for diversity is now widely understood and widely accepted.

That started with gender; and while progress has been made on that front, much more needs to be done. After all, only 12% of FTSE100 directors are women.

But most businesses now recognise that discrimination of any kind means losing talent. They recognise that different types of people bring new insights to a firm. And they recognise that allowing people to be themselves allows them to be their best.

That progress in thinking, unimaginable fifty years ago, is reflected in a variety of formal measures.

86% of Fortune 500 firms now ban discrimination on the basis of sexuality, while around 50% ban discrimination against transsexuals.

Many companies – like Arup - have established LGBT networks and other mechanisms of support.

Some firms have employed quotas and insisted on diverse selection panels, which has vastly accelerated the rate of change.

But despite this progress, there is still a long-way to go.

Despite the exemplary diversity policies in many companies, my sense is that the business world remains more intolerant of homosexuality than other worlds such as the legal profession, the media and the visual arts.

That is most obvious in the top ranks of companies. We have some great leaders who are openly gay – Tim Cook at Apple, Alan Joyce at Qantas, Charles Allen formerly of ITV, and Michael Bishop of BMI – but LGBT people are still woefully underrepresented at the top levels.

I am one of only a handful of publicly gay people to have run a FTSE 100 company.

In some industries, the situation is particularly bad. Among the many people I know in private equity, where I now work, fewer than 1% are openly gay.

Even today there are many people out there still afraid to reveal who they really are for fear of marginalisation and abuse.

I speak from experience when I say that it always feels safer to conform.

Often it can be the smallest things that make the difference between a truly inclusive environment and one that has all the right policies, but still engenders fear of exclusion or disadvantage.

It is things like homophobic jokes that you somehow get used to, but never accept. Or it's the conversational assumptions about spouses and children. Perhaps, even, it's the games of golf at the weekend.

And it's those tired old phrases of latent prejudice, “wouldn't it be better to have someone we know...?”

The solution is not easy. It is about deeply changing the way people think, to create a deep-seated inclusion, not codified in rules and policies, but in the thoughts and actions of everyone in an organisation.

Part of it is, I'm afraid, just a matter of time. Personal opinions tend to take root in childhood and take a generation to grow through society.

But simply waiting is not good enough. We can and must do more.

In my view, there are four key actions.

First, leaders in companies, and not just in human resources, have to think about inclusion in every decision they take. It comes down to a simple maxim: don't do anything that excludes people.

That requires opening up to new ideas, understanding people as individuals, and caring about each member of your team.

That is often called inclusive leadership. I'd say it is simply good leadership.

Second, companies must apply rigorous performance management to this issue. By setting concrete targets, putting in place the formal measures I mentioned earlier, and measuring progress against those targets, companies can drive diversity.

There is a multiplier effect in action here: the more gay people are out, the easier it becomes for others.

Third, we need to be personally vigilant against all forms of discrimination, whether in the workplace, in public life, or simply in the way we think of and speak to others.

That means taking individual responsibility and individual risk, and challenging things that are unacceptable.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, we need role models, particularly at senior levels. There is nothing more powerful at dispelling fear than seeing people who are smart, successful and openly gay.

We need gay people in business to be proud. That only takes small steps – bringing your partner to social events, saying what you did with him or her at the weekend (without hedging pronouns) and just talking about what it's like to be gay.

For many people, that takes real bravery, more bravery than I had at BP.

But those role models can start a cascade of enormous change. I think we are now close to that critical mass in business, where it is the intolerant that find themselves excluded.

[pause]

In driving that change, we have to be acutely careful of one thing: the threat of political correctness.

This is a difficult area, because that term is so often used by those who want to discriminate.

But there is a kernel of truth: action on diversity can become so artificial that it becomes meaningless, or even counterproductive.

Quotas, for example, are useful but very dangerous. If done badly, they can breed resentment and undermine those appointed under them.

The key is that merit must never be sacrificed. When that happens, the whole business rationale and the moral case collapses.

Similarly, diversity can never be allowed to divide.

The goal is an environment that values each individual regardless of which groups they belong to. It will be a failure if we create a series of protected groups, that come to define people's identity in the workplace.

If we can avoid those dangers, we can create a truly inclusive environment, in which coming out holds no fear.

There is still a lot of work to be done. But we must never forget what we've already achieved, nor forget those before us who made great sacrifices.

Nor can we ignore our duty to those abroad who face a very different life.

Homosexuality remains illegal in more than 70 countries. In 7 countries, it can carry the death penalty.

That injustice is primarily a British export, shipped abroad in the days of the Empire. In my view, we should be working overtime to correct it.

That requires global businesses to apply the same standards of equality to their operations and supply chains wherever they're located.

And it requires the government to exert the maximum diplomatic pressure, particularly in countries to which we give aid.

Together, we can change the future of those oppressed abroad, just as we have changed our future.

[pause]

I realise now that being open about your sexuality is not about pleasing the public. It is about being honest with the people who know you best and love you the most. Looking back I wish I could have been more truthful with those closest to me.

But now I am out, I feel amazingly fortunate. More than anything else, I feel a sense of freedom.

I hope that among the next generation of men and women in business, even more will be able to feel that joy of honesty, friendship and inclusion.

Together, we can make that happen.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.