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“Round my kitchen table podcast: Being a gay lawyer” 30 September 2011

Chair:

[Alex Aldridge](#) (AA)

Guests:

[Adam Fellows](#) Bar Professional Training Course Graduate

[Kevin Poulter](#), Employment Law guru of [Bircham Dyson Bell](#) (KP) & one of the founders of the Gay Employment Lawyers Network

AA: Hello and welcome to my weekly round the kitchen table podcast, I’m Alex Aldridge with me is Adam Fellows a barrister who was called to the bar in July. Adam is currently working as a legal researcher.

Also with me is my regular guest Kevin Poulter employment Law guru at corporate law firm [Bircham Dyson Bell](#).

Today we’re going to be talking about being Gay, Bisexual and Transgender groups. Kevin and Adam are both gay. Surely in this day and age, there can’t be much homophobia about, can there? Adam?

AF: On the barrister side of things they seem to be a lot more interested in your legal capability more than anything else. The one experience I have had though where my sexuality has been directly addressed, it was a very negative experience. It was at a networking thing, barristers, students, benchers, governors of the Inns of Court who all got together after a dining night and were all telling stories and I happen to drop into conversation at one point about my then, partner. And someone took me to one side to have a quiet word and said it’s not a very good idea to mentioning that in public. The thing that through me was that the Bar has a very traditional image and

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the idea that you can associate with the more senior members of the Bar. This was in fact a younger employed advocate whose organisation I would not necessarily associated with those views. And with it ever having been an issue, positive or negative before, I was very taken aback by it.

AA: Was this advocate gay himself?

AF: No, she wasn't.

AA: Ah. Kevin, what about you? Any similar experiences?

KP: Well I hope I've been judged at each stage of my career on my abilities and I suppose that's it. That said, we have spoken about this before. Does your face fit, are you the right personality for the firm, I think that's where a lot of it comes down to it. I'm not saying that people go out looking for gay employee's but I hope that friendly personality, nice guy whatever, I hope that is what it's been based on as opposed to fitting a demographic or ticking the diversity box. And I'm sure that's been the case and I've got no reason to believe otherwise.

AA: What about the positives of being gay? Last week me and you Kevin went to an [InterLaw](#) meeting and it seemed like a really good networking opportunity. Lawyers of different levels, trainee's, associates, partners and law firms indeed barrister's chambers tend to be very hierarchical places. At this event it seemed that those hierarchy's were, to a large extent, broken down...

KP: Yep. I think that it's a great opportunity to meet people and contacts. Whether it's an opportunity for networking in the sense that you might get extra work from it, probably not. But it nice to know there other people out there who have been in a similar position, and hopefully have done quite well out of it as a result, or not as a result of it but not hindered by that fact.

AA: Sure. And Adam, you were saying of mic you are a member of an LGBT group for barristers.

AF: Yes that right the [Bar Lesbian and Gay Group](#), I'd actually have to agree with Kevin. It's actually a great socialising opportunity and if you are working at chambers it's a very small close nit environment and unless you are in a chambers that has a lot of other gay members it's quite likely your working life might not necessarily have as many gay people in it. So organisations like BLAGG that are really good for the Bar to actually get to know other gay barristers. Especially for students, it was very positive to see a profession that had a, as I was saying before, a very traditional image to see so many barristers who had got pupillage tenancy and there are even out gay judges now.

KP: Absolutely right, and I think we need to be careful though that we don't go too far, it is a good opportunity there is a great chance there to meet people and to have some role models if you like, but we can't just rely on that, it's everything else that goes along with it.

AA: What do you mean?

KP: If you in a law firm for example, Clifford Chance, and other Magic Circle firms, they probably have their own LGBT Groups within the firm. Why do you need to go elsewhere?

AA: So you're saying there are too many LGBT Groups?

KP: Well, no not necessarily. I think it's nice that people can get out there and meet other people and if there is the opportunity to help people that's a great idea but it's nice to have some sort of objectives behind them.

AA: What would be a good objective to have?

KP: It's nice to have something else to add. I'm going to get some clients, for example, I'm going to look for a barrister instructed on this case recently. All these things look better for you if you are in a firm or chambers and there is more support in doing that sort of thing than going down to the pub and meeting other gays.

AA: In an ideal world, would you have a single LGBT Group that applied Barristers, Solicitors with the view that clients could come along too?

KP: I think as an employment lawyer, yes I would love to go to an event like this where there are HR professionals where I can then meet and at least potentially schmuse for work. Why not?

AF: Maybe it should be, not one group for all lawyers and associates maybe it should be split down with more practice areas?

KP: Potentially, yeah, I think there is a place for the global and space for the specialist if you like.

AF: I guess that is why there are so many groups out there; there are many that just want the social aspect of it. And others that do want to use it for professional networking and that's why there are so many groups because I don't think not one group would be able to cater for everyone, without it automatically splintering off anyway.

AA: Need to move on to a finer point, one point we shouldn't ignore one is the lack of data collection in relation to LGBT which has obviously been in the news of late. With the news about the Judiciary collecting a whole series of different pieces of data including ethnicity and gender but not collecting any figures about judges sexuality and obviously that's been changed recently (Kevin agrees), I'll ask you Adam; Do you think that there should be transparency of data?

AF: Well, it comes to the crunch that people may not wish to necessarily disclose their sexuality on a piece of paper as much as any organisation, especially the government who turn around and say your data given to us will be completely anonymous there are some judges that wish not to put the data down - or put any data down - out of choice, and you can only work out some of the data....for example if eleven members of the supreme court put down 'male' and one put down

'no response', well we all know who that one response is (Baroness Hale) the female Justice of the Supreme Court (all agree). But there is (pauses)...sexuality has been a tricky one, in the report done earlier in 2010 about judicial diversity in that there was no sexuality data collected and there was discussions back and forth about the fact that there should have been (agreement in background by others) I suppose it comes down to the crunch that regardless of whether people actually want to put that information down it does send out a very positive message if people are willing to collect it and others are willing to at least put something down.

AA: It seems that without this collection of data about sexuality we're still in an environment where firms have a reputation for being gay friendly, or not. Similarly barrister's chambers. Do you think that is fair? Do you think there are some gay friendly firms and some not gay friendly firms?

KP: No, I think it depends on the department you work in, the department you are working for and that is the reality of it. I don't think that, I would hope not, that overtly there were any anti or homophobic firms! I hope that's not the case. I'm not aware of any hierarchy in terms of gay friendliness.

AA: Interesting. Adam, chambers?

AF: I think it's the same again, I think if you are looking for pupillage, you tend to work out on mini-pupillages and work experiences and networking with barristers at chambers whether you're a good fit, regardless of not just sexuality but personality as well.

KP: This is true, it's all about. It doesn't matter whether you are gay, straight or whatever it might be, or anywhere in between, it's all about how you present yourself. That's what law firms look for in interviews and that's what barristers look for in interviews, how are you going to be as a representative of this firm that's what it comes down to. I would hope whether you are a judge or a solicitor, legal executive or a trainee, it doesn't matter what you are, black bisexual or in a wheelchair. As long as you are capable of doing the job and are a good advocate or representative of the firm, that's what should count.

AA: I suppose though with any discussion about LGBT issues, there is a risk of talking about it like your sexuality has to define you. It's only a part of you and not always, well, often not relevant to your job at all. So whenever there is a discussion about LGBT, there is a risk of overstating that.

KP: Yeah, yeah. And the same for the judges. Why would a judge want to say 'I'm gay' because having made a lenient judgement the Daily Mail would say 'Gay Judge X Sympathetic Liberal Role' blah blah blah.

AA: You put yourself into a box...

KP: A label, that shouldn't exist.

AA: Guys, it's been a pleasure, again I will be back next week, round the kitchen table, from Kevin Adam and I, good bye.