

Foreign Commanders Discuss Open Gay Service

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Establishing an atmosphere of trust and strong leadership are the keys to implementing policies allowing open gay military service, current and former foreign military officers and academics said Wednesday during a panel discussion in Washington.

“It’s creating that climate in which people can be themselves, truly be themselves, are comfortable being at work, and then they can be the most productive and contribute the most that they can to the unit,” said Cmdr. Luc Cassivi, an openly gay 17-year veteran submarine commander now serving as commander of the Canadian navy’s submarine division. “That’s how you build cohesion, and that’s how you build operational effectiveness.”

All restrictions against open gay service in Canada were lifted in 1992.

“The key to buy-in is leadership,” added Australian army Lt. Col. Mick King, a logistics officer now assigned to the Australian Embassy, referring to the implementing a policy change allowing open gay service, which his nation also ratified in 1992. “You have to believe in it, you have to establish an organizational climate which has trust. People have to trust their commanders.”

The daylong discussion at the independent Brookings Institution think tank, co-sponsored by the pro-gay rights Palm Center think tank, was aimed at better informing the ongoing congressional deliberations on the law that bans open gay service and the current Pentagon survey of the force that aims to build a consensus on the best way to implement President Obama’s intent to repeal the law and end the Pentagon policy known as “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Participants said that if the U.S. law and policy are to change, it would be best to do so expeditiously and that clear guidelines need to be established.

Canada’s policy shift “was implemented quickly,” said Karol Wenek, director-general of military personnel for the Canadian Forces. “The change was unequivocally supported by senior leadership. The change process was low-key, and explicitly communicated an expectation of normality in the work environment. Commanders at all levels were engaged in communicating the rationale for the change and encouraging its acceptance. And they were also provided with information to assist them in responding to the personal concerns of some [Canadian Forces] members.”

Several participants acknowledged initial resistance to open gay service. When Australia changed its policy, King said, “There was some gnashing of teeth by individuals.” But for the most part, he said, “The policy came, and went. Everyone just got on, and there was no discernable change that anybody could see.”

One panelist said the rank-and-file can handle such momentous change better than many give troops credit for.

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“I think people underestimate, sometimes, the ability of the soldier or sailor or airman to salute the flag and get on with it under good leadership,” said retired Australian army Maj. Gen. Simon Willis, a combat veteran of the Vietnam War.