

## **Visit to Washington, DC November 30<sup>th</sup> – December 4<sup>th</sup> 2023**

This visit encompassed participation in both the Victory Institute International Leaders Conference and Outright International's annual event, OutSummit 2023.

The Victory Institute is the world's largest international network of LGBTIQ+ elected representatives and its annual meeting usually held in November or December each year. Some 600 elected representatives, candidates, activists and allies attended the 2023 conference which is testimony to the growth and success of its work over many decades.

Speaking to open Elected Officials Summit which was part of the overall Conference Tammy Baldwin the first lesbian member of the United States Senate, spoke powerfully of the growth of LGBTIQ+ representation over many decades. Victory's roots are in the International Network of Lesbian and Gay Officials (INLGO) that started in 1984 when a dozen elected officials met for the first time in San Francisco. Two years later Tammy Baldwin attended for the first time as a young county supervisor in Minnesota. Almost forty years on Senator Baldwin is predicted to comfortably hold her Senate seat for the third time in this year's elections, and it's estimated there are over a 1,000 out LGBT+ officials worldwide.

The VI International Leaders' Conference like any global gathering of politicians is a chance to discuss the latest thinking on a range of policy issues. This year's agenda covered migration policy, particularly in the context of LGBTQ+ migrants and asylum seekers, gender-affirming healthcare for young people and adults, the particular challenges faced by LGBTQ+ minority communities, the rise of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, and the defence of abortion rights and the struggle for reproductive justice.

One of the principal focuses of the Victory Institute is its goal of maximising LGBTIQ+ representation in elected office worldwide. The associated Victory Fund is a registered political action committee that provides direct financial support to candidates on a bipartisan basis that are standing for elective office in the US. The Victory Institute provides training and mentoring support for candidates, principally domestically but increasingly internationally. As we debate practical means of improving diversity and inclusion in Welsh national and local government, in the context of the democratic reform bills currently before the Senedd, it was interesting to see how Victory Institute structures its support for LGBTQ+ candidates: with sessions on fundraising,. There was also a session on how to campaign in an inclusive fashion, incorporating different language needs and accommodating individuals with different disabilities. The key idea here was that being truly inclusive cannot just be in the form of who is elected but also the how.

Because of its US base, the majority of the delegates hailed from the United States. As a result much of the agenda mirrored specifically North American concerns e.g. gun safety. A common theme both in panel discussions and in the informal conversations in the networking sessions was the forthcoming Presidential election and the simultaneous down-ballot Congressional and state legislature elections. Though a bi-partisan event, with some LGBTQ+ Republicans present, there was much discussion of the wave of anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives, often with a heavy emphasis on anti-trans rights policy, at state level led by the

Trump-supporting Republican Right. There was relative optimism about the ability to combat this campaigning in electoral terms due to the evidence of poor results by aggressively anti-LGBTQ+ candidates. Efforts at bridge-building with moderate republicans – including those with an evangelical background – seemed to be bearing fruit at State level in key areas. More anxiously, the prospect of a Biden v. Trump re-run in November '24 – and the conservative majority on the Supreme Court that is the legacy of the first Trump presidency - was the inevitable backdrop to much of the discussion. As in *Roe v Wade*, might decades of progress be about to be suddenly reversed?

Beyond the US focus, there were more international delegates than ever at this year's event. The first ever out gay Speaker or Cathaoirleach of the Irish Seanad, Jerry Buttimer, accompanied by the Fianna Fáil member of the Seanad, Malcolm Byrne. He was able to point to the re-appointment of fellow Fine Gael member Leo Varadkar as out gay Taoiseach as a sign of the progress that had been made since Ireland's first out gay politician, David Norris, was elected Senator in 1987.

The Conference also heard powerful and inspiring examples of breakthroughs for LGBTIQ+ representation in Latin America. Congresswoman Carolina Giraldo was given the trailblazer award as the first ever out Lesbian to be elected to the Colombian House of Representatives in the 2022 election that saw the number of out LGBTIQ+ members of Congress triple to six. We also heard from Esteban Paulon, the former president of the Argentinian federation of Lesbians, Gays Bisexuals and Transgender People, who won a seat in the Argentine Congress in October '23. This cause for celebration in the Argentinian LGBTIQ+ community was tempered by the trepidation engendered by the election of the openly homophobic Argentinian President, Javier Milei.

Outside of the formal programme I was able to have conversations with the Victory Institute team about expanding its work into Europe and the Commonwealth, potentially tying in with the work of the CPA. We also talked about how Victory Institute's knowledge and experience could be potentially applied in the context of a reformed and expanded Senedd and efforts to maximise the opportunity it could afford to build a diverse and inclusive Welsh democracy.

Outright international, one of the leading organisations campaigning for LGBTIQ+ equality worldwide, held its annual OutSummit which brings activists and allies around the world together, around the same time as the VI event this year and I was able to attend some of the sessions at this event in addition to the International Leaders Forum. Major themes this year included efforts by the Inclusive bank Advocacy Network to make sure that the World Bank includes LGBTIQ+ rights in its anti-discrimination policies and how to combat the wave of anti-trans rhetoric and legislation that have been witnessed worldwide in 2023.