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Same sex marriage may be an issue in the Presidential Election
"I want to live honestly," says US Consul-General, whose spouse is of the same sex as him
(By Hideaki Sakamoto)

It seems that same-sex marriage will likely be one of the issues in the US presidential election next fall. In February this year, President Obama stated that the 1996 federal law limiting marriage to between a man and a woman is unconstitutional, taking a step toward legalizing same-sex marriage at the federal level. Such moves by the Democratic administration will inevitably provoke a backlash from many same-sex marriage opponents in the Republican Party. Against this backdrop, Mr. Patrick Linehan (58), who has been candid about his same-sex marriage, arrived in Osaka in September this year as U.S. Consul-General. "We are the message," said Mr. Linehan. The presence of a married same-sex couple has somewhat surprised the local Japanese community and facilitated a slight shift in Japanese thinking about a seldom-discussed subject.

At various official functions where past consuls-general were accompanied by their wives, Mr. Linehan is accompanied by his "husband," Mr. Emerson Kanegusuke (39), a Japanese Brazilian. When Mr. Linehan visited the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima City, he stood side-by-side with Mr. Kanegusuke to lay a wreath at the cenotaph for atomic-bomb victims. In the U.S., equality for gay people has been a political issue since the 1990s, following the issues of equal rights for women and African-Americans. The focus is on whether the government recognizes same-sex marriage in the same way that it does opposite-sex marriage, and the issue has had an influence on election results.

Accompanied by a "husband" at various functions
Mr. Linehan said about Japan, where he has served twice, "I find it very accepting." When he introduces Mr. Kanegusuke as "my husband," the other person's surprise or bewilderment sometimes comes across. But that is only momentary. "Japanese people don't display their feelings so much and are quick to understand," said Mr. Linehan. "I haven't received any negative reaction at all."

Mr. Linehan and Mr. Kanegusuke first met at a sports bar in 2002. Mr. Linehan was the US Embassy spokesman, and Mr. Kanegusuke was visiting Japan after having left the Brazilian Air Force, where he was an air traffic controller. They started living together on the Embassy's housing compound, went together to Brazil, Mr. Linehan's next post, and then to Canada, his next assignment, where the two married in 2007. They came to Osaka in September this year, following Mr. Linehan's tour of duty at the US Embassy in Seoul.

In 1984, when Mr. Linehan became a US government employee, if a person's homosexual orientation was discovered, they would have lost their job. During the Clinton administration, things improved greatly for gays, and an openly gay man was appointed ambassador. There is now an organization of several hundred gay employees at the State Department.

Positive signs for better treatment

Treatment for same-sex spouses has steadily improved in the federal government. When they moved from Canada to Seoul, the airfare for Mr. Kanegusuke was not covered by the government, but when they moved from Seoul to Osaka, it was.

Meanwhile, the Japanese have had to deal with the unprecedented phenomenon of someone in a same-sex marriage filling the post of U.S. consul-general. The consul-general and his spouse are often invited to official events by local municipalities and other organizations. The invitations the new consul-general received during the first weeks after he took office were addressed to "Consul-General Linehan and Mrs. Linehan." Now that the situation is understood, such the invitations bear the correct addressees: "Consul-General Linehan and Mr. Kanegusuke."

Mr. Kanegusuke became the first man to fill the honorary post of a women's organization for promoting Japan-US friendship–a post successively held by the wives of consuls-general. "At first I thought I'd decline," said Mr. Kanegusuke, "but they talked about the need to modernize themselves and their organization. I was persuaded to accept the post."

Consul-General Linehan does not make vociferous arguments, simply explaining, "I just want to live honestly."

"It took us many years in the U.S. to arrive where we are today," he said. "I believe our mere presence here will get our message across."

Legalized in Six States / Majority "Approve"

U.S. public opinion is divided over same-sex marriage. But the trend is toward acceptance. Last year's census shows that the number of same-sex married couples and unmarried partner households has increased by about 180% over the last 10 years to about 650,000. A public opinion poll this year indicates that more than half of the respondents favor same-sex marriage for the first time.

According to Gallup, a US polltaker, 53% approve of same-sex marriage and 45% oppose it. The figures in 1996 were 27% vs. 68%, indicating overwhelming opposition. The difference in number between the pros and cons, however, has gradually shrunk, and this year saw a reversal for the first time.

In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. Now same-sex marriage is lawful in a total of six states, including New York, which legalized it this year, and Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, in California, the state supreme court ruled gay marriage was legal in 2008, but a state constitutional amendment to restrict marriage to opposite-sex couples was passed later in the same year by referendum. Now the case is in the federal court system.

President Obama stated in February this year that the 1996 federal law that says marriage can only between a man and a woman is unconstitutional – a move toward legalizing same-sex marriage at the federal level.

Looking at the rest of the world, same-sex marriage has been legally recognized in the

Netherlands, Norway, Canada and elsewhere. Many African and Arab countries, however, stipulate strict punishment for homosexual activity.