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SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR

FACES OF LEADERSHIP

The Hon. Michael Kirby

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THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE?

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The biggest challenge I faced in my life was not so big, looking back on it. It concerned the little matter of my identity. And the challenge to be honest about it with my family, friends and colleagues.

Around the age of 12, I came to realise that I was gay. At that time in Australia (as is still the case in many countries) there were harsh criminal laws to

punish gay people for being themselves. These laws reflected deep social attitudes, many of them coming from old religious beliefs.

It took a long time for me to challenge this irrational attitude. Fortunately, there had been leaders who went before. They included pioneers in Germany such as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Magnus Hirschfeld. And in Australia, Norman Haire, a real challenger of the status quo. In Austria, Sigmund Freud challenged the prejudice. In America, Alfred Kinsey undermined its scientific basis.

Young gay people are often silent and ashamed of their reality. They fear disappointing their parents. They are terrified of undermining their professional and career ambitions.

Eventually, urged on by my partner, Johan, I confronted my demons. In the middle of the AIDS epidemic they seemed so trivial and absurd by comparison with the catastrophe that was unfolding and killing our friends.

I have come on several occasions to the Salzburg Seminars at the Schloss Leopoldskron. I have engaged in brilliant dialogue with leaders from many countries in sessions on topics as distinctive as information privacy, genetic bioethics and human rights in North Korea. But the sessions that came closest to my heart's core were those on sexuality and human rights. A revolution has been fought and is being won on equality for sexual minorities. Its success depends on leadership and courage – not only on the part of gays. It demonstrates once again the power of an idea whose time has come. It has only come because of leadership.