

Out of the Closet, Into the Nineties

For a decade, lesbian and gay male politics have been at arm's length. In the cold climate of the late Eighties, however, the threat of the moral right has provided much more of a shared agenda. In articles based on talks originally given at Sydney's Politics in the Pub, Lex Watson and Betty Hounslow report from the front . . .



Life After AIDS

AIDS is the greatest challenge to the gay male community, ever. But Lex Watson argues that it may have managed to do what two decades of gay politics have failed to do. . .

If you look at the history of gay politics and gay organisations in Australia, there was nothing prior to 1969. There were some organisations — the Council for Civil Liberties, for instance — which expressed a bit of an interest in homosexual law reform. That was the extent of it.

In 1969 a couple of organisations emerged which talked about what was then, I think, generally perceived — probably including in the gay male community, but certainly in the wider community — as the sole homosexual issue: law reform. It was a male, legal, political issue. Lots of other countries had had organisations devoted to law reform going back twenty, forty, fifty years. We came to that point in 1969.

But in 1970 gay liberation hit Australia — gay liberation which, as

a term, came from America, from mid-1969 and Stonewall. Gay liberation said that the world was now different. We have to change in three ways, essentially. First of all, it said that our political agenda should be much wider than law reform, than just changing those areas of the Crimes Act which relate to male sexual offences. It said that there were other legal issues like discrimination which were important. But it also said that we needed to look at a very different style of politics. We needed to look beyond the traditional polite (and largely heterosexual-fronted) lobby groups. It was not simply a matter of a wider agenda: we needed to create a whole style — both of life and of politics — which was not part of the earlier gay politics. A lot of that drew on the experiences of 'sixties women's liberation and the black power movement in the States.

The third thing it said — and it's not unrelated to the first — is that we had to have a very different perspective on the world at large. We had to look at coalition-building, at a very different political analysis of the world, and we had to look at why this sort of oppression occurred as it did.

Thus, in Australia around 1970-71, when gay liberation emerged — and it came in largely on the coattails of women's liberation — we started talking about a much wider political agenda, but also an agenda which was an attempt to locate gay and lesbian oppression within an analysis of the society at large. And this was, broadly speaking, a left agenda.

Two things need to be noted about that moment. The first is that the gay liberation movement in Australia in 1970-71 grew out of the political left; it did not grow out of the gay (essentially gay male)

subculture. It grew out of a political analysis, not from a subcultural need. That is not to say that a lot of gay men didn't feel the need for that analysis. It is not to say that, directly or indirectly, gay liberation didn't change the way in which people saw themselves, lived their politics, and responded politically to the outside world. But it is to say that it did not really draw a major response from the gay male subculture — from the men who went to the gay bars and dances, who were in the scene. I think it's fair to say (and this is dating myself) that I'm one of the very few people who was an activist in 1970-71 and who had had some significant experience of the gay subculture, the parties, the dances, the social groups, the bars, prior to 1970.

One of the ongoing themes of the gay male response through the 'seventies and into the 'eighties, has been the need to try to put gay politics and organisations, and our perspective as gay activists, together with the perceived needs of quite a large subculture, and to try to get the two sides to interact. We have tried to say: we are a political movement, a group of organisations (which nonetheless within those organisations have different perspectives) including church groups, more or less left political groups, and so on; and we want our concerns to be felt by, if you like, the potential constituency, to try to interact with them. Through the 'seventies and into the 'eighties, increasingly issues like law reform and anti-discrimination were recognised by the gay male subculture as legitimate political concerns to which they should be responding, and around which they should be active. Now, that wasn't easy, and it's not been particularly successful. As someone who's been involved in it, I'd have to say that I don't know that we've done a tremendously good job.

Through that period, however, one crucial thing happened organisationally. And that is that, across that period (and most particularly from 1975 on, although it goes back to 1970-71) we developed a gay press, essentially a gay male press. There was no gay press before.

We've also developed some gay radio programs, a certain amount of exposure on mass television, and so on. So we now have a means of communication, at least to the subculture, one which has become a form of communication, of politicisation, and some would say of radicalisation, which simply didn't exist prior to 1970. It has become a vital vehicle in the gay male community for organising, informing and — even where people only read it and don't do anything about it — a focus of human concern around gay issues.

Gay liberation grew out of the political left, not the gay subculture

In the early 'eighties one crucial thing happened to disturb this orderly process, alas — and it was AIDS. AIDS has fundamentally changed the style, the content and, indeed, the whole notion of gay male politics. And it has done something — unfortunately, as it happens, but nonetheless in a very real way — that nothing else in the gay community did. AIDS has been independent of class, and fundamentally independent of relationship with the subculture. It has affected *all* gay men in a way in which law reform, nice idea though it was (and much though I spent years doing it), didn't really do. Many gay people thought anti-discrimination was wonderful, many people felt more confident because of it, many people were very glad that they had it. But it didn't very often, directly and immediately, change their lives. AIDS has. And AIDS has consequentially rewritten the gay male political script in a way that nothing else has. Perhaps one could argue that the Mardi Gras in Sydney, as a gay community event, has come the closest to this far-reaching impact, but AIDS has a very particular resonance.

In 1983, when AIDS first became an issue, we formed in NSW something called the AIDS Action Committee. We rang up Laurie Brereton, the then Minister for

Health in NSW. We said to him: AIDS is here; we want to come and talk to you about it because we want to be actively involved in the fight against it. He said come in. We sat around a table and talked about it. In formal terms, not all that much came out of it. But the bottom line was that the Minister had said, for the first time: I've opened my door; come in, sit down, let's talk about it. Twelve months later, on law reform, gay men were still standing on the footpath outside Parliament House, with the gates locked, jumping up and down, saying to the government: open the gates; we want to talk to you about law reform.

As it turned out, a month or so later we did get law reform, thanks to a private member's Bill. But the fact remains that, on AIDS, they had said, come in, let's talk about it, we'll deal with it. We'll incorporate you into — not co-opt you into — the discussion process and the decision-making process. Yet twelve months later they were still saying: we don't want to talk to you about law reform.

AIDS has done something which is quite unexpected in the normal perspective of gay politics. It has almost made gay politics respectable. Thank God, in a sense, that it has, because we are now part of a process of which we crucially need to be a part. Because if AIDS politics and AIDS policies are conducted without the formal, active and upfront involvement of gay men, and in particular the people who are infected with the virus, AIDS policy will fail. Bizarrely perhaps, in terms of our expectations, and bizarrely perhaps also in relation to the way in which governments have dealt with past epidemics, they have (the Wilson Tuckeys of this world notwithstanding) in fact recognised this — perhaps not as well as they should have, but they have recognised it.

Gay politics is now changed. We have government-funded gay-community-based organisations with budgets of half a million dollars a year. We are being involved in the education process. Crucial also is the fact that — notwithstanding that the

odd journalist doesn't want to know about this — the gay male community's response to AIDS is recognised widely as being extraordinarily competent, well-based, energetic and successful.

AIDS has rewritten the script for virtually all of us as gay men who are active, for a couple of reasons. First of all, because it is overwhelmingly taking up the resources of those of us who are prepared to work in the gay community — notwithstanding the people involved in Mardi Gras, in the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, in the Immigration Task Force, and in other areas. The bulk of gay men who are politically active are working in AIDS.

Second, precisely because it doesn't discriminate, as I mentioned earlier, AIDS has brought a very large number of gay men who have never been organisationally active before, into gay organisations — into the community support network, the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, the AIDS Council of NSW, to name but a few. The fight against AIDS is getting a huge commitment in terms of time and involvement from very many gay men whose politics have never been left, whose politics still aren't left, and who may well regard



Photo: John Jenner

themselves as being apolitical. That has become an important factor in terms of the ongoing process of putting the community/subculture and the organisation/movement together.

Finally, at the end of it, AIDS has created the sense that the community at large, and politics at large, will never be able to talk about gay men, and probably homosexuality in the way they have before. Because gay men have been forced to come out, whether we wanted to or not, as part of the politics of AIDS, we are now in a position to say: we

are on the agenda and there is no way that they can take us off it. We're on the agenda because it's recognised by government that we're good at what we're doing in the AIDS battle, that we're indispensable in that battle and, because of that I don't think that they will ever be able to force us back into the closet — which perhaps was not the case just seven years ago. AIDS has rewritten the script of gay politics. Who knows now what the rest of the story will be.

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Whatever Happened to the Personal?

Over the Eighties, lesbians seemed to retreat from the arena of personal sexual politics. Betty Hounslow wishes they hadn't.

It's virtually impossible to talk about lesbian politics or a lesbian movement because there are a myriad variants of lesbians and lesbianisms. There are the essentialists, the spiritualists, the separatists, the socialists, the non-feminists and the feminists — the list could go on.

Likewise, it is difficult to talk about a lesbian movement in the

same way one can talk about a gay male movement. Lesbians, as a political force in the wider world, have been located both within the women's liberation movement and within the original gay liberation movement. And they have been critical and defining influences on those movements. Sometimes they have been in both of them; sometimes they have absented themselves from the male gay

liberation movement; and sometimes there have been lesbians in each arguing with those in the other camp that they shouldn't be there at all. And all the time our autonomous lesbian movements have continued to operate.

So I have tried to confine my comments here to a kind of middle ground, to those areas where I think lesbians and gay men are starting to come together on political agendas.

and some of the elements we have in common, and in common with the left in general, in trying to think afresh about the arena of personal sexual politics. This convergence of interests, if such it is, comes at the end of a whole era where it was no longer proper to speak of gay politics as if that term absorbed both men and women. There has been an entire era in which symbolic name changes have been a very important thing. The Gay Counselling Service has become the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service; the Gay Immigration Taskforce has become the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Taskforce; the Gay Rights Lobby has become the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby.

Nor has it been just a matter of semantics. That differentiation came out of a real differentiation which erupted in fairly bitter battles in the late 'seventies and early 'eighties, as gay men and lesbians trying to work together realised that they often had very different agendas and different ways of organising which made it extremely painful to try to maintain that coalition. Interestingly, however, in the last twelve months there has been a resurgence of coalition politics among gay men and lesbians. Most of the groups in the broader gay and lesbian community are now mixed groups and, while women are still a minority in many of those groups, they are no longer a powerless minority: we're no longer just addendums to organisations; we are critically and centrally placed within those organisations.

That change has not come about simply through a change of heart, or from a decision that we all want to give each other a second chance, or be nice to one another. Rather, it has come about because of some changes in the objective political situation, such that the political arena provides us with shared political agendas now, much more than in the early 'eighties. We've also had the benefit of the influence of our parallel movements in the United States and in Britain which have demonstrated the importance of coalition politics in fighting the conservative political and moral agendas of the 'eighties.

By coalition politics, incidentally, I mean not just combination with our gender counterparts, but also with the left in general, and the creation of links with anti-racist struggles and progressive movements across a broad spectrum. The upsurge of the New Right, and the election of the new government in New South Wales in particular, mean that the issues which we will have to fight will increasingly be shared issues between lesbians and gay men, and have shared agendas.

In New South Wales, the Festival of Light now wields much more power than before, and they are frankly trying to stifle homosexuality in all of its manifestations, trying to reproduce Thatcherism in NSW. And while the expressed justification for these attacks may be AIDS, their proposals would equally affect lesbians even though we are, of course, the lowest risk group.

There are the essentialists, the spiritualists, the separatists, the socialists, the non-feminists and the feminists ...

Indeed, the Greiner government in NSW has its own conservative moral agenda, which is going to affect lesbians and gay men specifically as, indeed, a whole range of other groups — broadly speaking the disadvantaged groups in our community.

Again, the Victorian summary offences legislation was used recently to arrest and convict a woman for a sculpture in Mildura which had an explicitly lesbian text. It is worthy of note that in his summing up the magistrate explicitly referred to the problem as one of the "promotion of homosexuality" which should be stopped.

More generally, there will be problems with the continued funding of the few explicitly gay and lesbian autonomous services. In NSW there is now a tax on the 20-10 gay and lesbian youth refuge, with the suggestion that maybe the best thing for it would be for it to be brought under the umbrella of the Wesley Central Mission (the mind boggles).

Sympathetic bureaucrats are suggesting that women working in women's services should delete as many references as possible to the words "lesbian" and "feminist" in their submissions. And there will be funding problems with internal progressive units in government departments. Already the Anti-Discrimination Board is being starved of funds. The cuts in education in NSW will affect the non-sexist programs which are dear to the hearts of lesbians.

On the federal level there is also the question of immigration rights, the recognition that there are, in fact, gay and lesbian Australians who are unfortunate enough to fall in love with people of other nationalities, and who want to live together. The gay and lesbian immigration taskforce is, aside from the AIDS organisations, perhaps the largest and most flourishing gay or lesbian political organisation in Australia, with attendances at meetings in Sydney, for example, of seventy people a month. It's interesting that the taskforce has worked closely in coalition with other groups concerned about the upsurge of racism in the immigration debate, and has worked in organisations where, before, we would never have been invited, such as the new national immigration forum being convened by such respectable groups as the Australian Council of Churches and the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils.

All this suggests that there is likely to be a high visibility of the gay and lesbian movement in the next couple of years — probably much higher than in the recent past — which is not to say that this comparatively low profile of the movement should be confused with political inactivity. Lesbians and some gay left men have been highly visible in a whole range of political issues and organisations over the last few years. In the January 26 march for Aboriginal sovereignty and land rights in Sydney, the gay contingent was large and the lesbian contingent was huge. We've seen lesbians and gay men active in solidarity struggles; lesbians have been key and critical



Photo: Tribune

players in the peace movement, and in the education sphere. So there hasn't been any let-up of specifically political activity by lesbians and progressive gay men.

Now, however, we will very likely see it supplemented by a much higher profile in the areas of explicitly homosexual and sexual politics.

And, indeed, it's impossible to discuss the state of lesbian politics without raising the question of sexual politics. And here I'm bound to say that it seems to me, on both an individual and a collective basis, there's been a retreat on the left from a scrutiny of personal sexual politics. One of the major breakthroughs of the women's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement in the early 'seventies was in deprivatising the area of sex and sexual relationships and bringing them into the arena of sexual politics. I sometimes wonder now where all of that energy has gone.

There are still pockets of men and women consciously or deliberately worrying the bone, especially among the younger generation of lesbians and feminists. But it seems that many of us who lived through the turmoils of the 'seventies have retreated from that arena of personal sexual political struggle. We're still active on issues that bear on the sexual domain, like abortion, AIDS and sex education — and that's good. But it's different from thoughtfully, collectively and publicly examining the meaning of sex in our lives, and how the conduct

of our personal sexual practices and relationships is influenced by and, in turn, impacts upon, our political views and aspirations.

I'm personally not surprised by this retreat because many of us who lived through the 'seventies got a bit bruised and bloodied and battered in them. But I think that it is a problem. I think that we have lost that ground; I think that the conduct of sexual relationships, the conduct of our personal sexual politics, have become reprivatised in a way that I didn't think would be possible after the 'seventies. It hasn't been reprivatised within the four walls of the family home, as was the case before, but within the comfortable circles of our small political and cultural tendencies.

I know that, within the lesbian movement, if we could characterise it as such, we had some dreadfully difficult debates in the early 'eighties between lesbians and feminists with completely different views about that arena of sexual politics. We had major battles which focussed around issues like censorship and S&M and paedophilia, but which were really about the role of sex. How can you reconstruct your unconscious mind, which has been so deeply formed and scarred by this capitalist and patriarchal society? How much can you push the margins? What's the boundary between pleasure and danger? How do women cope with the fact that, for us, sex is never ambiguous, that because we have objective oppressive relations in our society, for women sex is always ambiguous; it is always potentially

both pleasure and danger? Those were some of the questions we faced. We split over that, and ultimately we retreated into our own areas. Some focussed on the dangers of the sexual domain, and major campaigns against censorship, for example, and S&M. Other focussed on the pleasure idea of libertarian release, of a myriad forms of sexuality. And we've never brought the two sides together again.

It seems to me that gay men are precisely at that point now, too, because for the first time in their history, gay men are also faced with that ambiguity of sex — that it is both pleasure and danger. I hope that gay men will be able to hold those two poles together, and not split in the way in which the feminist movement split over those issues. We need to reopen the debate over sexual politics on that level, and not just stay in the safer domains where we can fight more easily around the issues that impinge on it, but which allow us to remain silent and privatised about the actual conduct of sexual relationships, the actual form of our sexual practices, and how these actually impinge upon our politics. How can our politics change them? And where our politics in fact are useless, and unable to change them, do we have to live with what we've got?

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These two articles were originally delivered as talks at Sydney's "Politics in the Pub" series at the Harold Park Hotel in August.