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# Anti-LGBT rights campaigns and the figure of the child

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## Publication Details

S. McKinnon 2017 Anti-LGBT rights campaigns and the figure of the child Australian Women's History Network  
<http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/child-in-anti-lgbt-campaigns/>

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# Anti-LGBT rights campaigns and the figure of the child

## **Abstract**

Scott McKinnon contributes to our marital equality series by exploring the often relied-upon arguments regarding children, 'radicalisation' and education in campaigns against LGBT rights.

## **Keywords**

rights, figure, child, campaigns, anti-lgbt

## **Disciplines**

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Publication Details**

S. McKinnon 2017 Anti-LGBT rights campaigns and the figure of the child Australian Women's History Network <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/child-in-anti-lgbt-campaigns/>

# AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HISTORY NETWORK

## Anti-LGBT rights campaigns and the figure of the child

*Scott McKinnon contributes to our marital equality series by exploring the often relied-upon arguments regarding children, 'radicalisation' and education in campaigns against LGBT rights.*

Opponents of marriage equality often argue that legalisation of same-sex marriage will harm children. The Australian Christian Lobby's Lyle Shelton, for example, recently described the children of same-sex couples as a new "stolen generation." A television advertisement issued by the "Coalition for Marriage" makes no mention of adult couples marrying, but instead features a number of women describing school programs they claim will be made compulsory if the "yes" campaign is successful. One mother states, "School told my son he could wear a dress next year if he felt like it." The group's website claims "saying 'yes' to gay marriage would mean saying 'yes' to radical gay sex education in schools."

The Turnbull government's actions have given increased visibility to these arguments, yet to historians of sexuality they look depressingly familiar. Conservative Australian religious and political leaders have long deployed the figure of the innocent child as a barrier to improving the rights of LGBT people. In such instances, a particular image of childhood is constructed and then positioned as being at risk. All school students are imagined as inherently sexless and ungendered, and yet are also understood as uniformly heterosexual and cisgender. These children are then described as being threatened by the actions of LGBT adults with nefarious intent.

Always absent from such arguments are the rights and needs of LGBT young people.

In a recent article for *Australian Geographer*, I explored how this rhetoric was deployed in two debates about lesbian and gay rights in New South Wales in the early 1980s. First, I looked at the Gay Teachers and Students Association (GAYTAS), a group of activists who hoped to provide school students with positive information about lesbian and gay lives. Second, I looked at the campaign to decriminalise sex between male adults. The parallels between the arguments of conservative voices in these 1980s debates and the arguments made by similar voices in the



GAYTAS MEMBERS PARTICIPATE IN A SYDNEY PROTEST, JUNE 1979.  
IMAGE VIA JOHN WITTE.

marriage equality debate forty years later are striking.

## GAYTAS AND THE “KIT ON HOMOSEXUALITY”

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In 1981, two school teachers and GAYTAS members, Geoff Ostling and Edd Ashmore, received a federal funding grant to develop a “kit on homosexuality” for distribution in schools. The planned kit would include reading guides, film strips and slides featuring, according to Ashmore, “photographs of people who identified as gay and who looked perfectly normal—they didn’t have horns growing out of their heads”.

The planned kit would not be sexually explicit and was not intended as a sex education resource. Instead, it would address the absence of positive information about homosexual people in schools. Ostling and Ashmore hoped that this would help lesbian and gay school students feel more comfortable with their sexual identities.

When news of the kit reached the tabloid press, however, the ensuing scandal saw Ostling and Ashmore condemned in the media and in parliament. A *Sunday Telegraph* headline screamed, “Lurid sex reaches schools.” Fred Nile called the kit a “direct attack on traditional motherhood and family life.” Federal Liberal MP Jack Birney decried “the possible adverse effects of the widespread distribution of this kit on the children of New South Wales.”

The kit was never produced and lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in the state’s schools were denied access to reassuring and supportive information about their lives.

## DECRIMINALISING SEX BETWEEN ADULT MALES

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Between 1981 and 1984, a series of attempts were made in NSW state parliament to reform or repeal legislation that criminalised sex between men. Sex between women had never been specifically criminalised, although a range of laws were used to police the lives of lesbians and bisexual women. Until decriminalisation in 1984, a male adult charged with having consensual sex with another man faced a potential gaol term of fourteen years.

Opponents of decriminalisation again argued that any change to the law would place children at risk. Opposing a 1981 reform bill, Nationals MP Jon Brewer argued that all MPs “should do all they can to prevent homosexuality penetrating our schools or being inflicted on the community generally. It is necessary to protect our young people and the community generally from homosexuality and homosexual acts.” The argument seems to have been that decriminalising sex between adult males might give younger people the idea that such acts were socially acceptable. The threat of gaol terms for adult men was therefore necessary in order to discourage children from contemplating a queer future. When decriminalisation was enacted in 1984, a discriminatory age of consent of eighteen for homosexual sex and sixteen for heterosexual sex was inscribed into law.

Opponents of decriminalisation often drew on the “slippery slope” argument still favoured by opponents of marriage equality. Under such arguments, LGBT rights are opposed, not on the basis of the proposed legislation, but on the basis of often bizarre future possibilities, including people marrying their pets, family members or inanimate objects.



DENNIS ALTMAN AND CRAIG JOHNSTON AT A GAY RIGHTS DEMONSTRATION IN SYDNEY, 1981. IMAGE VIA NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA.

Imagined threats to school students also often feature. In 1982, Liberal MP Rowland Smith argued that criminalisation had to be maintained in NSW as a buffer against “the widening of other laws and their recognition of such things as teaching homosexuality as an alternative life style in schools”. In 2017, Liberal Senator Matt Canavan has argued against marriage equality because, “The next step of the activists will be to ban Catholic schools and churches” from teaching the section of the bible relating to marriage.

Again, completely absent from the conservative rhetoric deployed in the 1980s were the rights and needs of LGBT young

people. Never considered were the LGBT students coping in an education system which either denied their existence or described them as sick, criminal or sinful. Never contemplated were the difficulties of facing a future in which your adult sexual and romantic life could lead to imprisonment.

Fortunately, the legislative changes begun in the 1980s have significantly improved the lives of LGBT people. It remains unfortunate, however, that LGBT young people must now watch as the validity of their lives and future relationships are positioned by the Turnbull government as an open question to be publicly debated. And LGBT adults must, yet again, endure accusations that our very existence is a threat to children.



**Scott McKinnon** is a Vice-Chancellor’s Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research (AUSCCER), University of Wollongong. He has a research background in LGBT history, geographies of sexuality and gender, geographies of memory and the social dimensions of disaster. Scott is the author of [Gay Men at the Movies: Cinema, Memory and the History of Gay Male Community](#) (Intellect Books 2016).

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