

# BEFORE *Mardi Gras*

AMY THOMAS ON HOW GAY LIBERATION CHANGED AUSTRALIA

**J**une this year marked the fortieth anniversary of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The first parade, in 1978, was brutally attacked by police – a response that sparked a very public stoush over the rights of LGBTIQ people and the right to protest. The 78ers, as the first protesters are now known, won a stunning victory: most of the charges were dropped, and the right to demonstrate was secured in New South Wales. Yet, as the recent ABC historical drama *Riot*

accurately depicts, Gay Liberation groups – the first wave of Australia’s LGBTIQ movement – had been active for nearly a decade before the first Mardi Gras. In fact, by the late 1970s, gay liberationists were facing a religious backlash against the impressive gains they had made.


Revisiting this trailblazing period is timely given last year’s postal vote on same-sex marriage. The Yes campaign’s singular focus on marriage equality in the face of conservative

attacks on trans people and the Safe Schools program represented a cautious, small-target approach to social change – and it stands in stark contrast to the revolutionary aspirations of Gay Liberation. Whereas the Yes campaign was anxious to assure conservatives that it would not challenge gender roles, the gay liberationists of the early 1970s openly critiqued the nuclear family and other oppressive institutions. Emboldened by their belief in a world beyond capitalism, Gay Liberation went on the offensive, demanding nothing short of radical social change.

Much scholarship on Australian LGBTIQ politics affords the gains made by Gay Liberation in the early 1970s to the liberalism and lobbying of later decades. According to Australian historian Robert Aldrich, ‘Realpolitik was more effective than the liberationist theorising of the early 1970s or the queer theory of the early 1990s, even though the intellectual engagements of Gay Liberation provided a vital basis for later achievements’. He goes on to say that ‘many who took part in the [Gay Liberation] debates were would-be revolutionaries whose views were often utopian’, in contrast to the ‘worthy-minded participants’ of later decades who ‘tackled important personal and social issues in a new fashion’. In *Living out Loud*, Graham Willett argues that legal reforms proved wrong the liberationists’ belief that capitalism could not deliver, saying, ‘institutions and structures have proved very much more adaptable than expected’. When I interviewed Willett in 2008, he argued, ‘I don’t see any evidence that traditional radicalism has any evidence about how to get [liberation]’.

Feminist readings of the movement tend to focus on the tensions between gay men and lesbian women that emerged within the movement, and queer theory has arguably led to a trend away from analysing the role of mass social movements to an emphasis on more diffuse struggles and personal identity.

Yet all of this seems to miss just how groundbreaking Gay Liberation was. Spurred on by the emergence of a new radical left, gay liberationists scorned liberal discourses of tolerance and piecemeal reform. The movement



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developed a formidable critique of gender roles and the nuclear family, and rejected the notion that those embedded within capitalism were capable of changing the system. It was this radicalism that brought about real material changes in LGBTIQ lives.

Before moving on to the story of Gay Liberation, a quick note on terminology. Much ‘LGBTIQ history’ in Australia is really just gay and/or lesbian history, and rarely draws out the struggles of trans, intersex and gender diverse people. In some cases, this is because of differences in how people named and identified themselves throughout history; in others, it is because of the historian’s blind spot or ignorance. However, as we will see, a critique of gender roles and an emphasis on absolute freedom of identity and expression were central to Gay Liberation’s critique of society, and has much to offer discussions about trans liberation today.

## REPRESSION TO REVOLT

To fully appreciate the radicalism of Gay Liberation one needs to understand the social and legal context in which it emerged. To identify as gay or lesbian in postwar

Australia was to live a life of secrecy and shame. The 1950s and 60s saw concerted efforts to reconsolidate the nuclear family and traditional gender norms – both of which had been disrupted by the war – prompting a crackdown on homosexuality. Gay men, in particular, became targets for police harassment, state persecution and media hysteria, feeding a sense of insecurity, fear, loneliness and alienation. Colin Delaney, then NSW police superintendent, called homosexuality ‘the greatest menace facing Australia’, prompting the NSW government to further criminalise homosexual sex between men. There was a sharp increase in the number of people charged, as police escalated the use of entrapment techniques at gay beats. Names of arrestees were often printed in the paper, meaning those caught often lost their jobs, and sometimes their families.



The journey from liberal pressure groups to radical activism was short in the Australian LGBTIQ movement

Historian Frank Bongiorno writes of one group in Newcastle that came to the attention of police. Described as a ‘society of perverts’, they were (inaccurately) rumoured to have recognised one another by wearing yellow socks bought from a member of the group. After several police arrests, all the defendants plead guilty, most received suspended sentences, but four were imprisoned.’

Police harassment and violence became a regular feature of life. The Adelaide Vice Squad is considered responsible for the

murder of George Duncan, whose body was found in the Torrens River in 1972. He was likely picked up by an officer at the so-called ‘Number 1 beat’ and then thrown into the river – a commonly doled out ‘punishment’ – where he drowned. Despite public outrage and testimony from several witnesses (including that of another man thrown into the river the same night), the three senior officers accused of the crime were acquitted.

Historian Ruth Ford argues that the Second World War created opportunities for lesbian women to meet and helped with the formation of lesbian identity. After the war, the Victorian Police kept files on known lesbians in and around Melbourne. These women faced regular harassment and violence, often stemming from gender nonconformity, and the compounding circumstances of women’s oppression kept many lesbian and bisexual women tied to existing heterosexual marriages. Courts were known to take children away from women in relationships with other women. Joan, then in a lesbian relationship, quoted in Ruth Ford’s *Filthy, Obscene and Mad: Engendering Homophobia in the 1940s and 1950s*, describes the torment of being forced to stay with her husband because of this fear:

I stayed with my husband because there certainly wasn’t any Relief for you if you left and I certainly couldn’t leave my three children ... I couldn’t have left because the courts would have given all the children to my husband.

The tabloids were full of scandals about gay men, but there was little else available representing or explaining homosexuality. Most of the books written overseas in which homosexuality figured, such as Gore Vidal’s *The City and the Pillar* and James Baldwin’s *Another Country*, were banned in Australia. Homosexuality was also associated with

communism and those in public service came under increasing scrutiny. In 1951, the media reported extensively on a scandal surrounding two British diplomats, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, who had defected to the Soviet Union and whose 'betrayal' was assumed to be linked to their sexuality.

Paradoxically, it was this intensifying repression that gave increasing exposure to homosexuality.

International developments were also having an impact in liberal circles. The Wolfenden report, published in 1957, called for the decriminalisation of consensual homosexual sex in the UK, spurred on by a string of convictions against well-known men. In the US, organisations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis began pushing for law reform from the early 1950s. Here in Australia, the ACT Homosexual Law Reform Society, established in 1969, began campaigning for domestic reforms.

## THE NEW RADICALS

It was the emergence of a radical, non-Stalinist left in the wake of the Prague Spring that opened the way for a new form of gay activism. The largest radical organisation in Australia previous to this, the Australian Communist Party, had long dithered on the question of homosexuality; one member was expelled in 1958 after his homosexuality was revealed. But the campaign against the Vietnam War challenged the Communist Party's politics and created layers of new activists. The civil rights movement in the US was international news, and the campaign for Aboriginal land rights had put racial equality on the domestic agenda.

Robert French, remembering the period leading up to the formation of Gay Liberation, recalls:

Looking back on the period from the early 1960s through to the advent of the Whitlam

government in 1972, it is often the major social movement, or social changes, that seem to dominate the stage. The counter-cultural revolution, the sexual revolution, the advent of second-wave feminism, student power, the anti-censorship battles around 'porno-politics', and the anti-war movement all come to mind.

Complex social changes during the 1960s created the conditions for these movements to emerge: large-scale population growth after the Second World War boosted the number of people moving into the employable age group; very low unemployment rates increased workplace confidence and led to stronger labour movements; universities expanded rapidly, with student newspapers functioning as the megaphones of campus organising.

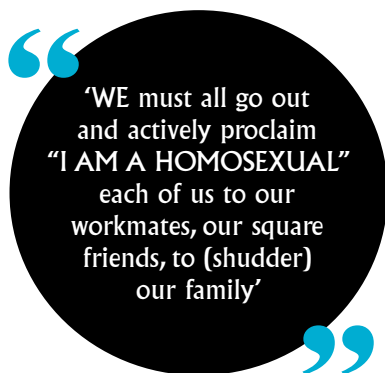
Thanks to this increasingly radical social climate, the journey from liberal pressure groups to radical activism was short in the Australian LGBTIQ movement.

While the Australasian Lesbian Movement (the local chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis) was the first openly homosexual organisation in Australia, it was the Sydney-based Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP) that was the first overtly political group. John Ware and Christabel Poll announced the formation of CAMP in September 1970, on the front cover of *The Australian*. The group's early statements reflect a liberal viewpoint, and its initial focus was on gradual law reform. But there was a twist: they were putting these ideas forward – really for the first time in Australia – as openly gay and lesbian people.

Poll outlined CAMP's intentions to *The Australian*: 'Basically and simply we wish to arrive at a situation where people's sexual and emotional preferences are no more relevant than the colour of their eyes.' After the newspaper article, CAMP received thousands

of letters of support and groups were soon formed around Australia. The Sydney branch created a voice for the movement in the form of *CAMP Ink*, a monthly newsletter.

It was not long before CAMP caught up with the radical mood. Only a few months after publishing an article arguing that protests would be a necessary step ‘eventually ... maybe not for twenty years’, CAMP organised a demonstration outside the Liberal Party’s Sydney headquarters. The protest was not against the Liberals, but rather in support



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of the sitting member against a particularly conservative challenger, Jim Cameron. But the placards at the demonstration – ‘Gay is good’, ‘I am a lesbian and should be treated as a human’, ‘I am a lesbian and beautiful’, ‘Gay freedom’, ‘2, 4, 6, 8, Gay is just as good as straight’ – suggest that the radicalism of the Stonewall riots was having an influence on Australian activists.

CAMP’s members didn’t understate the impact of their first demonstration, noting that it represented ‘the month in Sydney when we came of age’. The Sydney protest was soon mirrored in other cities and satellite groups sprung up on university campuses across the country. Brisbane’s first gay rights demonstration, organised by Campus CAMP in 1972, commemorated the Stonewall Riots in the city centre and was repeated the following year.

CAMP began to focus on ‘coming out’ as a political imperative, arguing that gay and lesbian people should be able to live their lives publicly, without shame or fear. The second editorial of *CAMP Ink* declared: ‘It is time for us to come out of the shadows and loudly demand our rights as human beings.’

By September 1971, the organisation had become much more assertive: ‘WE must all go out and actively proclaim “I AM A HOMOSEXUAL” each of us to our workmates, our square friends, to (shudder) our family, and all other personal contacts; and then to those we do not know personally.’ Coming out, according to *CAMP Ink*, was transforming what had once been ‘an agonising, terrifying, individual experience’ into something ‘beautiful ... [and] self-affirmative.’

This assertion of gay positivity and pride was building into a more radical critique of society. In 1972, Lex Watson, a key CAMP activist, argued that legal equality was only a ‘minimum framework’ for activists – a remarkable shift given that CAMP was formed only two years earlier in order to achieve just that. CAMP now merged both liberal and liberationist politics in one organisation, and it couldn’t last long. Tensions began to grow between CAMP in Sydney and some of the less radical satellite branches, and certain activists began to challenge other movements on the left.

## THE BIRTH OF GAY LIBERATION

In January 1972, Dennis Altman announced the formation of Gay Liberation at a conference at the University of Sydney. Some CAMP activists, known as the ‘gay liberation cell’, had become critical of what they saw as CAMP’s inward, liberal focus. They argued that CAMP was ‘completely contained within the system as it exists’ and that ‘the over-infatuation with homosexual law reform easily pandered to the conservative beliefs of most homosexuals’.

Gay Liberation quickly spread to campuses around the country. In 'Sexual Liberation: Fighting Lesbian and Gay Oppression', Rachel Morgain describes the movement's radical politics:

Militants in this movement sought nothing less than the overthrow of society's restrictions on expressions of sexuality and gender, and the institutions that supported this repression ... activists in Gay Liberation regarded society's treatment of gay men and lesbians not just as a kind of discrimination, but as a deeply rooted form of oppression, intimately intertwined with other forms of capitalist oppression and exploitation.

The new movement was heavily influenced by anti-war and anti-racism activism, both here in Australia and overseas. The most obvious reference was in the choice of the word 'liberation' itself – a nod to the National Liberation Front (NLF) fighting US forces (and their Australian allies) in Vietnam. For many on the new left in Australia, supporting the NLF was a matter of principle: a 1970 general meeting of the Monash Association of Students in Melbourne had, controversially, made collecting funds for the NLF its policy, following a years-long push by the Monash Labor Club. Just as Vietnam needed to be liberated from Western occupation, so too did sexuality need to be liberated from repressive social mores.

The Melbourne University Gay Liberation group described itself as a 'freedom movement':

[That] means freedom from sexual oppression imposed by social institutions or conditioning. Personal oppression through social conditioning is the feeling of guilt, shame, anxiety, frustration, despair. Liberation is feeling free and

being open about your sexuality ... [We call for] a general sexual liberation, one that will move far beyond the much vaunted 'permissive society' to a genuine release of our erotic and living instincts which are held back by the repression necessary for the maintenance of our repressive and inhuman civilisation.

According to Willett, Gay Liberation was distinct from earlier groups in that it regarded society as the problem, openly critiquing 'the systemic denial of civil rights and social legitimacy by powerful forces'. A 1972 leaflet by the Sydney branch advertising upcoming meetings gives a sense of the movement's political orientation:

'Aspects of Homosexual Oppression'

- Psychiatry as an oppressive force
- The Law and the Police – not just the 'legalisation of homosexuality' so called but the whole scene of being arrested on beats
- Anti-homosexual values in Western society
- and
- The homosexual movement in Australia (Gay Lib & CAMP)
- The Gay Liberation movement's relationship to Black Power and Women's Liberation

The formation of Gay Liberation marked a turn to street activism and civil disobedience. As the leaflet above indicates, a key site of struggle was the pathologisation of homosexuality as a sickness requiring 'treatment' through aversion therapy. Gay Liberation countered this by asserting the healthiness of coming out, arguing instead that *homophobia* was the sickness. They took a similar approach into their 'zaps' – flash-mob-style protests that involved the first gay and lesbian kiss-ins. Describing one Melbourne

demonstration in 1972, Willett writes, ‘a breakaway group of demonstrators darted into Myers, and same-sex couples noisily tested the beds and the make-up’; in Sydney, liberationists ‘[a]rmed with leaflets ... went into a Bondi Junction pub that was rumoured to be refusing to serve homosexuals’.

Altman’s *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, published in 1971, largely inspired the militant activism and revolutionary politics that came to define the movement. Melbourne activists held a demonstration outside the ABC’s headquarters because it had banned a segment on *Homosexual*. The protestor’s chants encapsulated their playful, in-your-face approach:

Two, four, six, eight  
Gay is just as good as straight  
Three, five, seven, nine  
Try it our way, just one time  
--  
Ho, ho, homosexual  
The ABC is ineffectual!

In *Homosexual*, Altman listed tolerance as an example of repression:

The present experience of the homosexual, in particular the liberal tolerance of which I have already written, seems to bear out all Marcuse’s fears of ‘repressive desublimation’, that is, greater apparent freedom but a freedom manipulated into acceptable channels. Thus most of the Western world has abolished legal restrictions against homosexuality while maintaining social prejudices.

Altman’s idea that ‘sexual liberation needs to take into account the essentially polymorphous and bisexual needs of the human being’ was influential. He goes as far as to suggest that sexual repression is the foundation of modern social oppression.

The new left critique of capitalism clearly shaped his position:

The simplest is a theory that attributes sexual repression to a need, developed early in the history of humankind, to beget large numbers of children for both economic and defence purposes. This would explain why homosexual and nongenital sexuality came to be subordinated to heterosexual coupling organised in the patriarchal family ... it is undoubtedly true that sexual repression was to prove highly functional for the rise of capitalism and industrialisation which, at least in its early stages, demanded very considerable repression in the interests of economic development.

Discussions around the role of the family were also informed by debates over sexism, both within and outside the movement. From the early 1970s, women began to express concerns over male dominance within Gay Liberation and the issue was hotly debated at the annual national conferences. Some women split and began to organise autonomously as lesbians, or chose to focus their energies on the women’s movement. For some, radical feminism, which saw separatism and political lesbianism (choosing to exclusively live and have relationships with women), was the solution. While some histories suggest that most women left the movement, the reality was far more complicated. Not all groups in the women’s movement were willing to welcome their lesbian sisters with open arms. And some women did not support moves to split gay and lesbian organising. One incident at the 1973 Women’s Commission conference in Sydney illustrates how such controversies played out. John Ware, of CAMP, sat next to fellow CAMP activist Christabel Poll and chained himself to his chair in protest at the exclusion of men, arguing for a coalition

approach. He won strong support from some women, and fierce opposition from others. These debates challenged participants to recognise and address the connections between sexism and homophobia.

Gay Liberation had a large influence on socialists and radicals, who synthesised insights from the struggle with their Marxist approach (Australian socialists were much quicker to do this than some of their international comrades). They saw sexual and gender diversity as a powerful challenge to the nuclear family and oppressive gender roles.

Peter Murphy, later brutally arrested at the first Mardi Gras, describes the theorising that went on at the time:

I had been an active participant in the homosexual movement in Sydney since 1975, when I first made contact with it through the Communist Party student group ... We were more into the street marches and forms, others were more into counselling services and social activity. We read radical gay and feminist literature from the USA and UK, we tried to link oppression of homosexuals with that of women and blacks and see how it fit into the wider domination of capitalism. In history we could find homosexuals everywhere, and enjoyed the irony and satire of the open and the hidden. For us, it was a liberation movement.

'The Manifesto of the Socialist Homosexuals', published in *Lot's Wife* in 1976, added a class analysis, explaining that capitalism required the nuclear family to replenish the labour force and socialise children into the gender identities that would perpetuate it into the future.

Tess Lee Ack, of the Socialist Workers Action Group and a member of Gay Liberation, argued even earlier, in 1972, that the movement needed to be careful not to

become a victim of its own success. This went along with early criticism of the pink dollar: in one leaflet, gay liberationists denounced 'the greedy gay capitalists and greedier criminal syndicates' that ran the bars and clubs.

Socialists within the movement argued for a deeper focus on class oppression and the struggle against capitalism. An anonymous article in *CAMP Ink*, 'Coming out at work', gives some insight into the application of these ideas:

My experience coming out at work is of special importance to gays in the movement because this is where Gay Power lies, in the working class. This is also where gays are most hidden and also where the majority of gays are. The gay movement must direct its voice not only to gays on the streets (a minority) but to the homosexuals in the workplace who have the greatest strength ... We realise that to have freedom, to love whom we choose, it is necessary to have a free human society, where people can be themselves.

Gay liberationists joined unions and pushed for them to take up positions opposing homophobia, and specific union groups sprung up in Sydney and Melbourne. Gay Liberation contingents also joined May Day marches and Vietnam moratoriums.

Jeremy Fisher's experience offers another example of the link between Gay Liberation and the labour movement. When Fisher was told he would have to leave his college at Macquarie University unless he renounced his homosexuality, he approached the Macquarie Students' Council. History was made in the next twenty-four hours when the Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) refused to continue work on campus unless the decision was reversed, marking the start of history's first 'pink ban'. Fisher tells the story:



I explained my problem with Robert Menzies College [to the Students' Council] and they immediately went to work, ringing their contacts across Sydney. Suddenly, the Builders Labourers' Federation (BLF) had green-banned the college over me. Almost immediately, I was a media event ... Within hours of Rod [Webb] and Jeff [Hayler]'s first calls, a reporter from *This Day Tonight* and a silent cameraman interviewed me under the grevillea on a rise near the chancellery ... Overnight I became the 'Jeremy Fisher incident'.

His situation pushed the issue of gay rights into the BLF, then engaged in a campaign of 'green bans' over key heritage sites in Sydney. Fisher recalls:

It was a brave decision for a union to take. It wasn't popular with members, though the principle that people should be free to express their sexuality was grudgingly accepted. It was also the first time anywhere in the world that trade unionists took industrial action on behalf of homosexuals.

The union's support for Fisher was not an isolated experience. In 1974, labourers took industrial action in defence of Penny Short, a trainee teacher expelled from Macquarie University for publishing a lesbian poem in the student newspaper. Willett also notes the 'remarkably successful' efforts of liberationists within the Victorian Teachers' Union, arguing that 'gay teacher activism was an important part of the gay and lesbian movement's work.'

## THE LESSONS

Gay liberation as an idea was flourishing by the mid 1970s. By then, it was possible to live a life outside the closet and to advocate openly for LGBTIQ rights – something inconceivable

in earlier decades. The movement had won decriminalisation in South Australia and set the scene for law reform in other states, while also laying down the path for federal anti-discrimination laws. The combined efforts of Gay Liberation and the women's movement helped prompt the Whitlam government's 1974 Royal Commission on Human Relationships, which described the challenges the state was facing:

The roles of men and women are being questioned. So are their expectations of one another. Areas of social responsibility, family responsibility, and individual need are no longer easily defined. Our notions of authority are being challenged, particularly by young people.

The tide had turned, and bigots were on the defensive. Gay Liberation achieved this by keeping up the pressure: even when battling for minor reforms, the movement maintained its overall principles and worked to realise its goal of an alternative future. Its vision was expansive: it challenged state and federal governments, university administrations, schools, the medical establishment, the media – anyone who stood in the way of a future society that was 'open and sex role free', as Melbourne University Gay Liberation put it.

This makes for a stark contrast with today's LGBTIQ movement, which has overwhelmingly embraced the politics of respectability and gradual reform.

In the recent equal marriage debate, the No side repeatedly attacked gender diversity, trans rights and Safe Schools, but the Yes campaign refused to respond. Rather than challenge these very public displays of homophobia and transphobia, the campaign decided to focus on 'positivity' and happy couples. Multiple instances of assault and harm were recorded during the survey,

yet the Equality Campaign's Tiernan Brady admitted, 'We have chosen as a campaign not to highlight that because marriage equality needs to unite the country not divide it.'

One might argue that the demands of gay liberationists reflect those of a more utopian, less cynical time, when revolutionary change seemed a possibility, rather than just a beautiful idea. Yet, short of a revolution, Gay Liberation's vision of a transformed future can infuse our current struggles with momentum, energy and a sense of justice. A movement committed to absolute liberation would have been willing to defend Safe Schools and the fundamental right of LGBTIQ kids to be confident in who they are. It would have been willing to extend the battle beyond marriage and challenge legal and medical restrictions undermining the dignity of trans people. A movement that rejects the neoliberal vision of society is one that can make connections with and through other social movements, such as those fighting for migrant, labour and land rights. Sadly, the Yes campaign is not that movement. It has closed shop, and in doing so it has let a great opportunity pass.

In some contemporary movements, the radical tactics employed by Gay Liberation are being used in effective ways – for example, in 2013, at the height of the #LetThemStay campaign, doctors and nurses at Brisbane's Lady Cilento hospital refused to discharge a refugee baby named Asha. She was allowed to stay and now remains in Australia with the 267 other asylum seekers sent to the mainland for medical treatment after detention on Manus and Nauru. Like Australia's pink ban in 1973, the stand taken by the doctors and nurses had wider ramifications beyond just winning Asha's security. Most notably, it has helped solidify a commonsense support for refugees among the medical profession and nursing unions.

The evolution of Mardi Gras – a riot that

has become a highly commercialised festival – epitomises the way in which progressive gains are won and yet oppressive structures remain unchanged. This year, the NSW Teachers Federation, a key site of LGBTIQ teacher activism, was initially excluded from Mardi Gras (organisers claimed the parade was full and couldn't accommodate some non-profits and community groups) and



was only re-included after community pressure. Given the recent backlash against Safe Schools and the rights of trans children, we should be building solidarity with teacher unions, not courting the ANZ and other corporations. Rightly, groups like No Pride in Detention and the Department of Homo Affairs challenged parade organisers from within and without this year. Revisiting the experience of Gay Liberation – the trailblazers who wanted not just 'acceptance' but also a new world – is full of rich lessons about how to approach the battle against homophobia and transphobia today.

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