

Gay Law Reform: A Celebration Address

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Tonight is the night we have set aside to reflect on our nine year campaign for gay law reform, what we have learned and what we have achieved. By coincidence, today is also the twenty eighth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots. On June 28 1969, the New York Police raided the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. A hundred times before, the police had used gay bars to fill their arrest quotas. In New York it was illegal to sell liquor to a homosexual. But that night was different. Instead of frightened nellys silently bowing to police brutality, the cops encountered homosexuals who defied their authority and fought back. The modern lesbian and gay movement was born.

The contribution which all of us have made to the recognition of equal rights for gay and lesbian people will go down in history as a milestone in the human rights movement that began in June 1969.

In the process of trying to repeal two archaic and foolish laws we have achieved more than we could have imagined.

We convinced the United Nations to find, for the first time ever, that discrimination on the grounds of sexuality is a violation of the human rights standards to which all nations subscribe.

We persuaded the Commonwealth Government to act on this decision by legislating to protect a fundamental human right, the right to sexual privacy. This was the first time this had happened.

And then there was the decision by the High Court to hear our grievances against the State's former anti-gay laws on the basis that our lives were overshadowed and our human rights potentially violated; also a first.

All of these judicial and parliamentary decisions were unprecedented, and each will have ramifications for millions of people across Australia and around the world for many years to come.

But, above all this, there is a more important 'first' for the lesbian and gay human rights movement which has arisen from our campaign.

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The campaign for gay law reform has seen our island change from being one of the Western World's most prejudiced societies to being one of the most tolerant. The low profile, and recent electoral defeats, of leading anti-gay campaigners indicate that the politics of hatred is a spent force in Tasmanian politics. Opinion polls bear out that in their hearts and minds the people of Tasmania have made the choice to begin to respect the rights of their fellow homosexual citizens. Statements by figures of authority make it clear that after years of fighting against change, the Tasmanian Establishment has, finally, made the same choice. In the words of Premier Tony Rundle, Tasmania is becoming a socially inclusive and tolerant society. Gay law reform is a symbol of that change. In the process of changing the law we have also changed our whole society. The fact that gay law reform was achieved on the basis of complete equality, and that we now have some of the best laws in the country, shows this to be true.

Of course, in changing the society in which we live, we have also changed ourselves. We have learned that our rights will not be handed to us by the powerful and the privileged, and that we must work hard for freedom, even if this means defying authority and convention. We have learned that real change comes not from quiet back room deals and from acquiescence to other people's agendas but from visible and vocal grass roots action which engages the entire community in dialogue. We have learned that defending our rights and our dignity in this way can involve great pain and sacrifice. But we have also learned that we can change things for the better if we are determined, if we are honest, if we are peaceful, if we maintain our faith in the good heartedness and rationality of ordinary people, and if we work together, each contributing what we can. Most of all, through working so hard to achieve them, we have learned the value of freedom and dignity.

Justice Michael Kirby discussed the meaning of our gay law reform campaign so rather than dwell on this I would like to talk about the future.

As each of you knows, gay law reform is not the end of the story. This State lacks a comprehensive anti-discrimination law protecting its citizens from unfair treatment on grounds such as sexuality. We have backward official policies on issues such as the discussion of homosexuality in schools and the provision of support services for gays and lesbians. We have still to convince the Government that the recognition of same sex relationships is an issue worthy of its attention.

But the cathartic nature of the gay law reform debate holds out the promise that we, as a society, can work constructively and co-

operatively on these issues rather than falling back into the hatred and division that has held us back in the past. Already the chances of getting an Anti-discrimination Act have improved, and the Education and Health Departments have asked us for input on new and more inclusive policies. More importantly, the lesbian and gay community itself has gained in pride and inner strength through a belated recognition by the Parliament that we have a place in this society. Two weeks ago Nick and I were invited to open a dance party in Melbourne. The event was attended by 9000 *individuals* who had gathered in the same place to dance and watch some shows. The next night I was in Hobart at the Queens Ball happily mingling with 900 friendly, happy members of a *community*. The difference was startling. Several years ago I set myself a simple goal. I wanted to be able to stand up and say 'I'm gay, I'm Tasmanian, and I'm proud of both'. Tonight I can.

These changes are important in themselves. But they are also important because they show how profoundly our former laws distorted and deformed our lives and our society. In a recent article in *The Examiner*, a former Liberal parliamentarian, Nick Evers, suggests that gay law reform was inevitable and not very important—a diversion from more significant issues that had nothing to do with human rights or grass roots campaigning. Evers' comments show that, above and beyond the wrongs that remain to be righted and the campaigns that remain to be fought, we must forever be the guardians of the truth of what has happened. We must not allow others to trivialise, ignore or deny, the importance of our achievements. We must always hold within our hearts the lessons we have learned and we must pass these lessons on to those who come after us.

The people at the Stonewall Inn on June 28 1969 took their destiny into their own hands and changed the world. We have done the same thing. And just as the memory of their actions inspires many of us, so the memory of our actions will inspire others to come. We don't know who these people will be, and we don't know against what injustice they will struggle. But we can be sure that their lives will be better for what we have done.