13 The End of Gay?

In his 1971 work, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, Dennis Altman concluded with a chapter titled 'The End of the Homosexual?'. In it, he suggested that, although society may come to tolerate homosexuals, only the victory of the liberationist vision, with its emphasis on unfettered eroticism and play, diversity and community, and the abolition of the narrow roles of normality could bring real acceptance. *Except that*, precisely to the extent that these values took root, the artificial and restricting roles of homosexual and heterosexual would dissolve. By a dialectical process, every advance of the homosexual movement would bring ever closer the end of the homosexual (and, of course, the heterosexual).

In the early 2000s this analysis looks either utopian or naive, depending upon one's viewpoint. Never have homosexuality, the gay and lesbian community and their issues been more visible or more seriously dealt with by the mainstream, or more entrenched in social and political life. And yet, for all of this, there are a number of ways in which it may well be the case that 'gay' is, if not at an end, then in its endgame.

On the one hand, this community, while visible, is losing its remarkability, becoming simply one of the many elements of Australia's multicultural mosaic, conforming to core values but taking advantage of the scope provided for any amount of variety at the fringes. In this model, gays may become of no greater social and political significance than other formerly reviled minorities—Jews, for example—subject to random acts of discrimination, despised by some, treasured by others and ignored by most.

On the other hand, it is clear that the gay community is under pressure from within, faced with a fragmentation that may reflect an inability to contain its own diversity; an inability that would result in the disappearance of the broadly encompassing category 'gay and lesbian'.

One of the great changes of the past 40 years has been the growing visibility of lesbians and gay men in Australian society. More and more high-profile homosexuals have accepted what activists have known for decades—that coming out is both safe and important. Some, in their coming out, have touched the lives of tens of thousands of people. The rapturous response when rugby player Ian Roberts came out—especially by young gay men—is an indication of just how significant positive role models can be in our lives.1 That he was able to go on playing his sport is testimony to the willingness of large numbers of straight people to accept open homosexuality, or at least to subordinate any discomfort to a higher loyalty to their team and their sport. And, of course, such very visible coming out is merely the tip of the iceberg: millions of Australians today have, and know they have, gay and lesbian friends, relatives and workmates.

This visibility is reinforced by the role of the mainstream media. Gays and lesbians are news. Mardi Gras, or any of the other festivals, generates more coverage of gay and lesbian life in a single month than was generated in any single year in the
1950s, perhaps even more than in that entire decade. It is difficult to think of a television sitcom or drama that does not have either regular gay or lesbian characters or, at the very least, the occasional episode in which homosexuality is the theme. Even Australianmade soaps directed at young audiences, such as Sweat and Breakers, have embraced the issue. And far from reinforcing negative stereotypes, they endorse toleration and even acceptance. The visibility of homosexuality in the 1990s is not only greater than in the 1950s and 1960s, it is immeasurably more positive.

In publishing, too, gay and lesbian works are now very common. Beginning with Elizabeth Riley's All That False Instruction (1975), writers have described aspects of homosexual life with passion and compassion, exploring the ways in which these lives are embedded in broader networks of gender, class and ethnicity. Even the most lighthearted, such as Phillip Scott's comedies, offer insights into the manners of modern, urban gay life. Some have become immediate bestsellers—Christos Tsiolkas' Loaded (1995) and Timothy Conigrave's Holding the Man (1995) were bought by thousands of people. A number of activists—Dennis Altman, Michael Hurley and Jenny Pausacker in her novels for young people—have turned their ideas into fiction. When the public thinks about homosexuals at all, it is likely to be in terms of stereotypes that have little in common with those of the past.

For the most part, these newly visible people—both real and textual—present as remarkably normal. The modern gay man, so universally 'young, attractive, short-haired, smooth-bodied, defined, muscular . . . white' that Dean Kiley has dubbed him Template Man2, is paired with the lipstick lesbian: attractive, fashionably dressed, wearing makeup and high-heels and stylishly coiffed. This has had its price. The new look has required a kind of demonisation of those who had gone before. The 1970s lesbian has been recast as the ugly sister—a man-hating, overall-clad, cropped-headed, hairy-legged victim of totalitarian identity politics. Gay men denounce the embarrassing lisping, sashaying, squealing queens of earlier days, and the spineless victims of an emasculating feminist bullying.3 Given the hegemony of liberal values and the normalisation of homosexuals, it is hardly surprising that, overwhelmingly, public opinion has moved, and is still moving, towards a genuine acceptance of gay people.

Support for law reform, which emerged in the early 1970s and was consolidated in the 1980s, has been expanded to embrace broader gay and lesbian rights. The triumph of liberal tolerance is now more or less complete. The shift towards acceptance (albeit an acceptance that rests on a willingness of homosexuals to conform to core social values, rather than to challenge them) is well underway. This is clear even on the more controversial demands of the movement. Asked whether homosexuals should be allowed to teach in schools or to serve in positions of authority in society, clear majorities of Australians answer 'yes'. The suggestion that gay couples should be treated the same in law as married couples elicited 23 per cent support in a 1995 survey—a remarkable response to a question that would have been inconceivable 30 years ago.4 Even the moral panic in the 1990s over pedophilia has done nothing to shake the standing of gay men. In the late 1970s those involved in the movement devoted considerable attention to exploring the issues surrounding 241 pedophilia, believing that when the backlash
against the gains of the 1970s came, it would be led by an attack on pedophiles. The Gay Teachers and Students Group and Gay Community News researched and published extensively by way of preparation for the onslaught, and were not alone in their concern. Twenty years later, the NSW royal commission into police corruption, which was suddenly redirected by the ALP into an examination of pedophilia as well, did much to raise the issue again, with its shameful decision to focus upon homosexual pedophilia to the exclusion of heterosexual pedophilia and its ludicrous definition of pedophile relationships as those between men over and under the age of eighteen. The bizarre claims of ritual murders and secret conspiracies among senior political and judicial figures should not distract from the very real hysteria unleashed by the commission's work, as names were dragged through the mud and lives and reputations ruined. But the effect on the standing of gay men—or rather, the lack of effect—is what is most striking. While it is probably the case that most people assume (wrongly) that pedophiles are usually male strangers interested in boys, they no longer seem to believe that most homosexuals are pedophiles. This great shift in thinking has been achieved over recent decades. The frightened silence of the gay press and of gay rights organisations during the trial of Phillip Bell, who offered an interesting defence and analysis of his sexual attraction to teenage males (which began with a relabelling of his desire as 'hebephilic'), seems in retrospect to have been unnecessarily defensive. The silence on the part of those promoting the concept of queer, who pride themselves on wanting to analyse and debate that which is different and transgressive, was even more startling.

Clearly, decades of activism have transformed the thinking of straight people. Increasingly, in everyday life, lesbians and gay men find their sexuality a matter of indifference to those around them. When John Howard declared that he did not think that High Court Judge Michael Kirby's sexuality was any of his business, he was undoubtedly reflecting the views of Australians more generally. When AFL and NRL footballers recognise that they are desired by gay men as much as by straight women and don't seem to mind, it is clear that the normalisation of homosexuality has made considerable progress. These attitudes seem especially true among younger people. Gay and lesbian high school students, cautioned by their elders about the risks of coming out, often do so anyway and find that those of their friends who remain onside are very much more numerous than those who pull away. It is hardly surprising, then, that the average age of coming out has plunged in recent decades. Even as a playground term of abuse, 'gay' operates more in the vein of 'dag' or 'dork' and quite differently to the more aggressive 'poofer' or 'dyke'. Campion Decent, director of Melbourne's youth arts festival, has noticed that in the young artists' scene 'being queer is so embedded. No one seems to give a shit anymore. It's like, get in there all together, gay, straight, whatever and make it work'. During the 1990s there has been a rise in the number of venues that, while basically straight, have no problem with the presence of lesbians and gay men at the bar or on the dance floor. For younger gays, these are often more congenial places to go—they and their straight friends can be equally open in their sexuality in a way that the straight friends cannot be in gay venues.
and public acceptance have made it possible for rights campaigners to make impressive progress, delivering achievements and opening up possibilities that would have seemed wildly utopian in 1970.

Anti-discrimination laws, equal opportunity policies and public education have been used to improve the lot of homosexual people. Increasingly the debate has focused not on whether lesbians and gay men should be left alone to practice their sexuality (decriminalisation), but whether they should have all the rights of heterosexuals. Full legal equality has become the demand of choice.

By the late 1970s the idea of applying anti-discrimination legislation (which had been developed for racial and ethnic minorities and women) to gays was being openly discussed in South Australia, and in 1984 it was, as we have seen, legislated in New South Wales. Similar laws were introduced at a steady rate thereafter, with Western Australia now the only jurisdiction not to have addressed the issue. At the federal level, the Senate's Legal and Constitutional Committee has proposed far-reaching protection on the grounds of sexuality, including within that term homosexuals, gays, lesbians, asexuals, bisexuals, transgender persons, transsexuals and heterosexuals.12 In 1993 in New South Wales the parliament extended the state's anti-vilification laws to encompass and protect lesbians, gay men and people living with AIDS, making it illegal to incite hatred or contempt against them.13 This was an important breakthrough because the most enduring threat to lesbians and gay men is that of harassment and violence, and any statement by the parliament—however little it might mean in practice—was at least sending a message to society.

In the early 1990s concern about gay-bashing reached new heights in most Australian gay and lesbian communities. Whether there really was more violence or whether it was being reported more often (probably it was both), it became clear that this was an issue that had to be tackled.

After a series of high-profile murders and trials (in which the killers often used the 'homosexual advance defence') several groups began to monitor the problem. Streetwatch, in Sydney, produced reports that counted and analysed anti-gay and anti-lesbian attacks.14 In Melbourne a survey by Gay Men and Lesbians against Discrimination noted that some 20 per cent of gay men and 11 per cent of lesbians reported being bashed, with another one-third having experienced threats of violence. There were demonstrations against police inaction and judicial indifference in cities as far flung as Adelaide, Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney.

Concern about anti-gay violence was by no means confined to the gay and lesbian community. In New South Wales, the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby's Anti-Violence Project was set up in 1994 with the assistance of funding from the Office for the Status of Women. In Victoria, the government's advisory committee on violence raised the issue and even the police began to take the matter seriously.15 The police were in a particular bind. Charged with enforcing the law and often genuinely horrified by the levels and intensity of the attacks, they were widely considered the 'natural enemies' of gay people (as much by themselves as by gays) and an entirely mutual 'loathing of generations' hampered their ability to act. Police-Gay Liaison Committees started to be
set up in the 1980s in many states, and gay people were invited to address trainee police. But it seemed that no sooner had some reforming commissioner declared that the 'Darlo Days were over', referring to the Darlinghurst police station's notorious record of anti-gay harrassment and violence, than another example of abuse of powers came to light. Most spectacular was the police raid on the Tasty nightclub in Melbourne in 1994 in which more than 200 patrons were held for several hours and strip-searched. Less dramatically, reports of bashings and entrapment on the beats surfaced with alarming regularity. Efforts to tackle this problem have involved pushing responsibility for police behaviour down to the local level. Station-based liaison officers charged with handling reports of anti-gay crimes and complaints about the police have been more inclined to take their duties seriously than more distant headquarters staff, and they do seem to be effecting a change in the police culture. In the 1998 Mardi Gras the appearance of a contingent of police officers marching in the parade, as opposed to attacking it, was much commented on—favourably for the most part.

In society more generally education efforts continue to make progress.

School-based programs to challenge homophobia exist as part of broader efforts around racism and sexism and the NSW Anti-Violence Project has drawn upon celebrities from a variety of walks of life to ask 'What are you afraid of?' None of these developments came about on their own, of course. They were the product of a great deal of effort by activists and of a new preparedness on the part of those in power to move beyond the issue of decriminalisation. The campaign for immigration rights for gay couples, for example, touches on two sensitive issues: immigration as such and the recognition of gay couples on the same terms as heterosexual ones. And yet, on this issue there has been great success. The issue first arose in public in 1985 when the Human Rights Commission recommended that 'genuine and enduring friendship or companionship, including permanent homosexual relationships' should be recognised for immigration purposes.

Some of those whose applications had been rejected under the existing policy spoke out, in an effort to give a human dimension to the implacable workings of the law, but conservative members of parliament remained unmoved. During this debate, and on other occasions, the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Task Force, which existed in both Sydney and Melbourne, spoke out, but in general the group preferred to work behind the scenes for fear of provoking a controversy that would scare off potentially supportive politicians. This approach paid off. From the mid-1980s on, the minister for immigration quietly changed the policy (if not the law) and, by treating gay applications on a case-by-case basis, allowed many lesbians and gay men to be united with their lovers. While this discretion was removed from the minister in 1989, two years later a new category of 'non-familial' migration was introduced, which recognised 'emotional interdependency' as a basis for application. The decision of the Australian federal government to allow openly lesbian and gay people to serve in the military was made in November 1993 with relatively little fuss and even less opposition. Again, the normalisation of gay rights is what is most striking here. The inclination of the minister of defence was, of course, to refuse to allow gays to serve in the forces. But even as he was rejecting an attempt by
Democrats in the Senate to overturn the policy, one of his colleagues was discovering that most ALP MPs were prepared to embrace reform. A caucus inquiry agreed with them and in the Cabinet debate no less a figure than Prime Minister Paul Keating came down strongly on the side of the reformers. The new policy was a very positive thing for those in the armed forces and for the message that it sent to the Australian public, but its significance went somewhat further than this, as one observer noted: ‘Serious politicians . . . have been prepared to deal with a gay rights issue as serious politics, involving deals and negotiations, Caucus committees and Cabinet reports, and to have the rights of lesbians and gay men dealt with as a real political issue in this way is a significant breakthrough’. These decisions (and some that came later, such as the sexual privacy laws enacted to deal with the Tasmanian situation) served to import the notion of equal rights for gays and lesbians into the political mainstream.

From the early 1990s on the legitimacy of these rights as such has never really been in doubt, though, of course, there may be debates about particular rights, and the fears surrounding the political consequences of acting remained an obstacle to progress. Nevertheless, real legal equality is now firmly on the agenda and its opponents are on the defensive.

Martyn Goddard has argued that the policy reforms around immigration and the military were the work less of established gay activists than of groups set up by those directly affected. This seems to be true, but this is how gay and lesbian politics have worked since at least the mid-1970s.

The single-issue action groups had long provided a means by which the long-termers or those new to the game could get involved around the issues that most interested them.

Attempts to set up broader groups to manage the range of issues needing attention were made in most states over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, with Sydney’s Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL), founded (or perhaps revived, if its links to the earlier GRL are recognised) in 1988, demonstrating what was possible. By the mid-1990s, a national body, the Australian Lesbian and Gay Rights Lobby (ALGRL), was successfully operating, drawing upon, or inspiring the formation of, state-based groups.

Among the issues outstanding, the age of consent (which is higher for gay male sex than for heterosexual sex in three jurisdictions: Western Australia, New South Wales and the Northern Territory) remains unresolved.

A 1996 proposal was issued by the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General that a national criminal code introduce an age of consent of sixteen in all states (including a sliding scale for those between the ages of ten and sixteen such as applies in Victoria). This languished until 1999 when a revised version was issued—one that carefully avoided the thorny question of exactly what this uniform age of consent should be. More recently, attention has turned to the ways in which state governments discriminate against same-sex relationships. Journalist Rodney Ford has even called this ‘the third big civil rights battle after decriminalisation and the AIDS backlash’. The extent of the problem is clear.
The Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission, for example, has identified 26 state laws and seventeen federal laws that treat same-sex relationships differently across areas such as marriage, adoption, access to IVF services, inheritance, property disputes between couples, employee rights for public servants and superannuation.24 But even here there has been progress.

In 1994 and 1996, the Australian Capital Territory included same-sex relationships in laws relating to property distribution in the event of death or relationship breakdown. In 1999, New South Wales went somewhat further to include provision for maintenance and hospital visiting rights, and Queensland allowed gay and lesbian couples to access work-related entitlements. The Victorian Labor government, elected in 1999, came to power committed to a range of reforms around these questions.25 And yet, at the very time that gay men and lesbians and their rights have moved into the mainstream alongside all the other communities and lobby groups that characterise Australian society and politics in the 1990s, 'gayness' has started to come under pressure from within. It is not only mainstream society that has had to acknowledge diversity and difference; so, too, has the lesbian and gay community. As the limitations of the one-size-fits-all community became increasingly obvious, more and more groups within it began to organise around their own issues and identities.

Given the way in which the broader social debate on diversity had been focused upon race, ethnicity and multiculturalism, it is not surprising that these were some of the ways in which the diversity of the gay and lesbian community was first noticed. The issues faced by non-Anglo lesbians and gay men are not merely those of discrimination, though these are real enough. There are also the complexities of cultural difference, ethnic pride and own-community homophobia to deal with.

Anti-Aboriginal racism in the gay community mirrors that of society at large, though there is a history of gay solidarity with Aboriginal struggles to consider as well. During the 1988 Mardi Gras parade, a group of Aboriginal lesbians and gay men satirised the bicentennial celebrations to an enthusiastic reception from the crowd. In Melbourne and Sydney in the mid- to late-1990s Lesbians and Gays for Reconciliation participated in a number of anti-racist demonstrations and took their message into the gay community marching and appearing at the fairdays. On the other side of the coin, there is, among Aboriginal people, a growing recognition of the problem of homophobia in the Aboriginal community, a recognition driven by gay and lesbian community members and by those involved in AIDS prevention. The maintenance and reconstruction of Aboriginal cultures against the genocidal practices of the past have brought the relationship between tradition and homosexuality very much to the fore for gay and lesbian Aborigines. Is homosexuality, as some assert, a 'white man's disease'? In the debate within the Uniting Church over homosexual relationships and gay clergy, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Caucus has been among those most opposed. The emergence of sistergirls, transgender people within and from traditional communities, has brought yet another dimension to these debates.26 For gay and lesbian Asians, the problem of racist rejection is supplemented by its opposite—the fetishisation of the exotic Asian. Is the rice queen (an Anglo person attracted to Asian
men or women) a racist? Is the potato queen (an Asian attracted to Anglos) self-hating? None of these questions are easily answered but they are at least being debated.

Race and ethnicity do not, of course, exhaust the diversity of the gay and lesbian community. Older lesbians and gay men are organising, too.

Vintage Men, Matrix (for older lesbians) in Victoria, and similar organisations in most other states gather older people for social and support work and to ensure that their voices are not lost in the wider gay and lesbian community.27 The recent emergence of bears—older, chubbier, hairier men (Template Man's worst nightmare)—has opened the possibility that all gay men, regardless of appearance, might find a place in the community.

There are bear clubs and celebrations of bear culture and pride spread over several days in most cities (Bear Essentials in Sydney, Southern HiBearNation in Melbourne and Fur in Brisbane). These celebrations include art festivals, parties, the Mr Bear Australia contest, beat tours and beer busts.28 The community has not yet completed its work in recasting itself to include everwider ranges of people. In particular, the needs and rights of young gay and lesbian people have not always been at the forefront of activists' minds. Historically, young camps were inducted into the scene by older men, 'aunties', who performed a recognised, valued and regulated function within the scene.29 Neal Drinnan has suggested that this pattern persisted until it was disrupted by AIDS, which created a generational suspicion on the part of young people.30 The willingness on the part of law reform campaigners to accept less-than-equal age of consent laws (in WA and NSW) may also have played its part, and is certainly indicative of a lack of attention to the needs of some of the most vulnerable. The 1990s moral panic around pedophilia may also have further estranged the older from the younger generations.

Youth issues matter greatly. Young people have fewer rights than adults, and fewer resources with which to make choices and protect themselves. Trapped in schools that can be hell if their peers decide they are poofers or lezzos, at the mercy of parents whose attitudes to sexuality may be very hostile, and isolated from a community that relies heavily upon licensed venues for its social life, young lesbians and gay men are extraordinarily vulnerable to homophobic self-hatred. Youth suicide rates (widely assumed to be high among young lesbians and gay men), homelessness and eating disorders among young gay men struggling to conform to the Template are issues are of real concern. (It is striking that young lesbians, influenced by feminism, have proved better able to resist these destructive pressures.) The lack of public attention to healthy, ongoing same-sex relationships upon which the young might want to model their lives has recently been identified as a serious problem.31 Never have the limitations of the 'consenting adult in private' slogan seemed more destructive.

This is not to say that nothing has been, or can be, done. AIDS councils, recognising the importance of self-esteem, run groups for the young that operate in ways reminiscent of the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s. In Victoria, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays has been able to establish an outreach to the most vulnerable group, those aged under eighteen, with its Minus 18 program and dances.
The coming out of Ian Roberts, Steven Gately (of the pop band Boyzone), actor Ellen DeGeneres, tennis-player Amalie Mauresmo and the character Jack in Dawson's Creek have been of enormous importance, bringing the visibility of homosexuality into the schoolyards and into the lives and consciousness of young people, gay and straight. It is not surprising, however, that more and more young lesbians and gay men find themselves treating the gay community as an optional extra in their lives. They are as interested in spending time with their heterosexual peers, as with a community that seems indifferent to, or afraid of, them.

If these differences exist because homosexuality is a feature of human beings regardless of race, ethnicity or age, and if attention to them is nothing more than the community working or failing to embrace its own diversity, the emergence into the light of new sexual practices represents something rather new. Fetishes, sex radicalism, fringe sexualities—there have been various terms used to describe a sexual interest in things such as uniforms, leather and sado-masochistic practices. For liberationists of the 1970s most of these desires were seen as symptoms of a distorted sexuality that would disappear in a truly free society. By the early 1980s, the hegemony of this liberationist rejection was under challenge—some indeed set out to apply the politics of gay liberation to fetish sexuality.

Rejecting psychiatric definitions, they argued that practitioners of fetish sexualities ought to come out in order to help people understand and become more accepting. They appealed for solidarity from the broader gay community, not just in the interests of fetishists but as a rejection of 'thin end of the wedge' attacks on 'sexual sub-minorities . . . weaker members of our community—the pedophiles, transvestites, transsexual and S&M exponents', which would inevitably open the way for attacks on gays in general. The success of these efforts can be gauged by the fact that by the early 1990s annual Leather Pride celebrations were being held in Sydney over a week that, in the words of Michael Primrose, 'speaks to us, expresses our art, talks our politics, honours our community and celebrates our sexuality'. Other states followed suit over the course of the 1990s.

Lesbians, in organisations such as Sexually Outrageous Women, were starting to embrace fetish from the mid-1980s. But it was the rise of Wicked Women, first as a magazine in January 1988 and then as performance evenings (complete with an annual Ms Wicked competition), that brought fetish sexuality openly into lesbian culture, proclaiming an 'unembittered, unequivocal celebration of lesbian sex . . . an eclectic mix of images associated with badness, rebellion, defiance and deviance', 'fighting for the kind of sex you want and defying any orthodoxy dictating what is allowed, what forbidden'. These politics did not go unchallenged. Liberationist objections were still to be heard from time to time. In response to a defence of uniform fetish, Chris Vane argued that the embrace of masculinity and dominance reflected a desire for acceptance generated by the ever-present fear of rejection and declared that 'To intentionally put on a uniform is to retreat, by varying but measurable degrees, back into the dark from whence we came'. Sheila Jeffreys offers a lesbian feminist critique along similar lines and suggests, further, that there is an element of lesbians jumping on the bandwagon at
Lesbians are starting to be affected by gay style, because gay men tend to have more money and to have more influence culturally . . . Male gay style dominates any mixed culture in the present.”36 The attraction of the gay and lesbian community for non-gay people started to become a serious issue (and a problem for many) in the 1990s, sparking an extraordinary series of debates around who was and who wasn’t part of the community. Mardi Gras, for example, found itself caught up in an annual brawl from 1989 onwards about the presence of heterosexuals at its parties, twisting itself into ever-more contorted policy decisions designed to minimise non-gays’ impact.37 The really big debates, however, tended to revolve around the place of bisexuals and transgendered people in the community. The bisexuality of human beings was assumed by most gay liberationists to be both a part of human beings’ richly polymorphous natures and a goal towards which liberation was working. Bisexual practice was common and uncontroversial.

What was controversial in the 1970s, however, and again in the 1990s was the question of public identification as bisexual and the political claims made on its behalf.

Over the course of the 1980s bisexuality remained a fact about which few were prepared to speak. By the early 1990s, drawing on US developments, and in response to ‘exclusionist attitudes’ by some gay and lesbian groups, bisexuals began to organise and speak for themselves. The first National Bisexual Conference was held in Perth in 1992.38 Groups in other cities and a national organisation, the Australian Bisexual Network (ABN), were formed. The ABN’s demands bore a striking resemblance to those adopted by the gay and lesbian movement in the previous decades. They affirmed bisexuality as a ‘positive and valid form of human sexuality’ and rejected the pressures on bisexuals to be ‘invisible, silent and closeted’. They demanded respect for bisexuality and bisexual persons and an end to anti-bisexual discrimination by lesbians, gay men and heterosexuals. None of this was particularly controversial and for the most part ‘bisexual’ has been added to the ever-longer list of groups within the community/movement, just as ‘lesbian’ was some years earlier.

For some, however, the demand that bisexuality be treated as an identity with equal status with lesbianism and male homosexuality raised serious questions and generated intense debates. If bisexuals were in fact a group within the gay and lesbian community—as implied by some Melbourne wall graffiti, ‘I am a happy bisexual lesbian’—there are bisexual gays just as there are Koori gays or older lesbians. Activists would oppose biphobia among gay people just as they opposed racism or ageism. But it did not follow that it was necessary to talk about a gay, lesbian and bisexual community, any more than one talked about a gay, lesbian, Koori or older community. Either we are all homosexual, with a diverse range of other characteristics, or we are not.

The argument that bisexuals are not a subgroup of homosexuals was put most forcefully by Catherine Lawrence, of Melbourne Bisexual Youth, who described bisexuality as ‘a separate identity, which isn’t an expression of gayness, but an acknowledgment of attraction to both men and women as a genuinely third sexual identity’.39 This would explain the often commented upon fact that, by and large, bisexual groups do not include ‘gay and lesbian’ in the title of their groups. Critics of this
positioned maintained that, if bisexuales were not gay or lesbian, their task was to build a movement/community of their own, though what such a movement might campaign for is not entirely clear.

Similar issues have arisen around the question of cross-dressing, transsexuality and transgender people. Cross-dressing represents a particularly interesting example of the way in which the success of the gay and lesbian movement provided a pole of attraction to groups that had previously eschewed any association. In 1974, Melbourne's Seahorse Club was very sure of where it stood in relation to homosexuality—as far away as possible.

Its advertisement in *Nation Review* read: 'Transvestites, contact "Seahorse", the Australian transvestite club . . . regular "femme" meetings with heterosexual transvestites in all states, including Darwin'.40 Femme, then, but most assuredly not homosexual. By 1998, however, the group was identifying as transgender and participating in Melbourne's Pride March and Carnival.

The term 'transgender' is a relatively new one, reflecting a rethinking of the old problem of gender non-conformity. If the term was new, the issues that it addressed were not. Transsexualism—the belief that one's sex (body) was out of alignment with one's gender (personality), the idea of being a 'man trapped in a woman's body' (or vice versa)—had been a part of popular thinking on sex at least since Christine Jorgensen's famous sex change operation in the 1950s. Transsexuals had begun to organise in the late 1970s. In 1981 the NSW group changed its name to the Australian Transsexuals Association and set out to develop national links. The organisation's focus was very much the kind of welfare and support work that many gay and lesbian organisations were undertaking at the time (counselling, employment and housing assistance), but the group set up a subcommittee to look into lobbying and media outreach. Its work was supported by the Gay Solidarity Group, which leapt at the chance to express solidarity with the social and political aims of the group.41 The emergence of transgender politics, as opposed to transsexual, represented the application of gay movement arguments to a group that was not actually gay; evidence that liberationist ideas could indeed have as wide an application as had been claimed for them. Transgender activists' first breakthrough was to reject the hard distinction between male and female. Drawing upon the feminist critique of gender, they argued that it was neither necessary nor desirable that people force themselves to conform to society's norms of masculinity and femininity. Their own lives and personalities told them that they, at least, should not do so. It followed, then (and here the liberationist rejection of the medicalisation of sexuality became important), that surgery to bring personality and body into conformity was equally unnecessary. As Roberta Perkins, one of the first in Australia to make these arguments, suggested in 1984, 'It's not about changing the body so much as changing the lifestyle'.42 If change was required, it was society, not the transgendered person or their body, that should adapt. This argument was directed as much at transgendered people who still believed in the old medical model as to the wider world.43 But minority ideas or not, the idea of transgenderism was to have an impact upon gay and lesbian activism in the 1990s. In 1993 the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby in Sydney expelled
transgender member Norrie May-Welby and, in so doing, unleashed a furious debate about the relationship between transgender people and transgender issues and the gay and lesbian movement. The debate was not about whether or not transgender people had a place in gay organisations—overwhelmingly, as a Transgender Liberation Coalition (TLC) survey found, they were quite welcome. Nor was it a question of whether or not transgender people suffered discrimination, violence and abuse. The NSW Anti-Discrimination Board report on this issue left no room for any doubt. The question was whether transgender issues were properly the concern of gay and lesbian groups and, on this, opinion was divided. The Australian Council on Lesbian and Gay Rights thought that they were and committed itself to deal with the 'rights, welfare and well-being of lesbians, gays and transgendered people'. The GLRL, on the other hand, decided that they were not—both for practical reasons (limited resources precluded the taking on of bisexual and transgender issues) and for political ones (many transgender people did not identify as gay, and bisexuals had the option of retreating in tough times). Here, the question of identity loomed large.

Transgender was, necessarily, not an identity. It was a behaviour, a practice, a set of practices—and for a movement that had, it was suggested, made its gains on the basis of identity, such a shift was too risky. In practice, when it came to working for transgender rights, even the groups that had been in conflict managed to work together reasonably smoothly. In September 1993, less than six months after the expulsion of May-Welby, the TLC and a cluster of other groups, including GLRL, the Lesbian and Gay Anti-Violence Project and the AIDS Council of NSW, were happily horse-trading over anti-vilification and transgender anti-discrimination legislation and working together on a Tranny Anti-Violence project. Where conflict proved more destructive was in the encounter between lesbian feminism and transgender. For lesbian feminism, transgender (usually conflated with transsexualism) represented the persistence of patriarchal values in the minds of transgender people and their supporters, who failed to grasp that, regardless of what was done to their bodies, people retained the gender into which they were born or in which they were raised. Male-to-female transsexuals were, in this analysis, merely 'constructed females' and the appropriate pronoun was always 'he'. This difference of opinion might not have mattered much, given that the community had long managed to embrace a variety of identities and political positions with minimal disruption, except that, in the mid-1990s, it provided the basis for a profoundly bitter and destructive debate around the Lesbian Space Project (LSP). The LSP was an effort by Sydney lesbians who had, over the course of 1993, raised something like $250 000 to buy a lesbian community centre. In mid-1994, a number of women attending the fifth National Lesbian Conference in Brisbane were horrified to discover that some of those at the conference, including one of the organisers, were in fact transsexual/transgender people. The conference itself became the scene of acrimonious arguments and many of those involved returned to Sydney determined to ensure that access to LSP was confined to those for whom the term 'women born women' was coined. Even among feminists this was a somewhat controversial position. The breakdown of lesbian feminism's hegemony meant that, for more liberal women, this
proposal to restrict LSP seemed harsh, unfeeling and unreasonable. What brought the matter to a head was the decision by transgender activists Aidy Griffin and Norrie May-Welby that such discrimination could not be allowed to pass unchallenged.

Over several months, through meetings and debates that became genuinely unpleasant, the issue was fought out. There were real confusions at work here and very different political positions. For lesbian feminists the case was clear. The transgender people were men attempting to access women-only space, against the traditions and practices of at least 20 years.

On the transgender activists' side, it is not clear whether Griffin and May-Welby believed that there ought to be no exclusionary spaces at all, whether they were claiming to have a right of access on the grounds that they were women (a position more usually associated with transsexualism than with transgender), or whether they were fighting on behalf of transsexuals as a distinct group of people who were, or believed themselves to be, women. Caught in between were hundreds of lesbians of all political persuasions and none, who were forced into positions and votes that they were not at all comfortable with. In the end, the vitriolic tone of the seemingly endless debate drove many of these women away from the project, exhausted and demoralised the organisers of LSP and undermined the ability of the project to deal with other problems as they arose. A property was bought and sold and the project is in effect in limbo. It was a salutary reminder that 'diversity' is not necessarily a solution to political differences.

If the diversity of the gay and lesbian community threatened to fragment it entirely, and its attractiveness to a variety of non-gay people created borders that were disturbingly porous, for at least one school of thought this was all to the good. Queer emerged in the 1990s as the celebratory voice of diversity and as, variously, style and militancy, celebration and patricide, shorthand and high theory. The term came into use in the USA in the early 1990s, plucked from the mouths of homophobes and thrown defiantly back in their faces. It was taken up by academics to badge the emerging field of sexuality studies, allowing them to incorporate not merely gay and lesbian, but a host of other issues including 'crossdressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and gender-corrective surgery'.51 In Australia activists moved in on the term in about 1992, taking it either for themselves or for their organisations (Queer Collaborations, Queer TV, Queer Lit, Queer Screen, Capital Q),52 and the claims of non-gays (bisexuals and trannies) for inclusion within the gay community came increasingly to be couched in queer terms.

This variety of uses of the term queer reflects, in part, its own theoretical claims. Proponents of queer theory, as a variant of that cluster of ideologies that includes post-modernism, post-structuralism and so on, want to apply the arguments of post-ality to sexuality. In accordance with the broader theory's metaphysics of absence, in which there is declared to be no reality underpinning our thinking and practices (or if there is we cannot know it), queer confines its attention to the level of knowledge, interrogating beliefs about sexual categories and sexual identities. Queer, which is, in this formulation, a verb (as Steven Angelides and Craig Bird have rather nicely put it),53 sets out to make us see the world differently, to strip away the blinkers of dominant thought patterns and to make us understand that really the world is composed, not of neatly bounded facts—
gay/straight, male/female—but of fluidity and flux. Categories such as gay and straight, insists queer, neatly but inaccurately partition the world between them, colonising our minds and our bodies. As an academic practice—that is, as a form of critique and a means of analysis—queer has carved out its niche over the course of the 1990s, moving from notoriety, to fashion, to being now just another tool in the analytic kitbag. As a politics, on the other hand, its effectiveness is entirely unclear. Certainly, queer has had remarkably little impact on the lives of gay and lesbian people or upon society more broadly. Unlike 'gay', which in a few short years was in the mouths of politicians, opinionmakers and people in the suburbs and was the description of choice used by most hitherto 'camp' women and men, 'queer' remains for the most part the preserve of 'fiction writers, student politics and a few feral academics', as one critic put it. Its ideas about the fluidity and constructedness of sexuality, for example, are held by remarkably few people and it is almost certainly the case that most gays agree with Ian Roberts, for example, in believing their sexuality to be genetic. To the extent that queer has had a politics, it has tended to be as a label indicating an adherence to militancy, defiance and confrontation, reflecting its US origins. In Melbourne, Queer Nation (1991), Buggers and Dykes (1992) and Queer Action (1996) came into being. In Sydney, One in Seven (1991) and, in Perth, Poofters and Dykes United in Anger (1991) and then Queer Radical (1996), all occupied similar space on the political spectrum. They emphasised action as an expression of anger.

Rallies in favour of anti-discrimination laws and against anti-gay violence, graffiti runs, fundraising dance parties, participation in anti-Hanson protests and solidarity with Tasmanian reformers, Aborigines and Reclaim the Night marches marked intense but shortlived bursts of activity. In Melbourne, Queer Action led several hundred people from Q&A nightclub to the Peel Hotel to protest against its discriminatory door policy. The problem was the fact that there simply wasn't the basis for sustained anger. Too much progress was being made on too many fronts for the politics of frustration and rage to capture the imagination of many, and none of the groups lasted very long.

Too much progress? No-one denies that there is still work to be done, that lesbians and gay men are the victims of violence, discrimination and contempt, and that for many young gays, their sexuality elicits fear and dismay in themselves and their families. Yet the lives of lesbians and gay men are immeasurably better than they were 40 years ago. Activists are less likely now than in the past to deny that progress has had its price, recognising that much of the subterranean vividness of the old camp scene has been lost. But who would, now that we have seen what is possible, go back, even if we could? We have remade ourselves, our lives, our families and our friends.

We have even reformed our society. Not in the way that liberationists hoped and imagined; institutions and structures have proved very much more adaptable than expected, and society has opened itself up to a variety of sexualities, family forms and communities, allowing us to carve out spaces for ourselves. As the century drew to an end, liberation as a project encompassing the revolutionary overthrow of all existing social structures had a faintly dreamlike feel to it, but its great goal—the creation of a
world in which oppression and persecution are a mere memory and in which real freedom of choice and new kinds of relationships and new sexualities prevail—seems worth remembering. Meanwhile, equality (a utopian yearning in the absence of a revolutionary transformation of the world, according to the liberationists) now seems firmly on the agenda and achievable in our lifetimes. Whether gay will still exist in any recognisable sense once equality has been achieved is something we will have to see.