

Resolution of Council

22 February 2021

Item 3.3

50th Anniversary of the Beginnings of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

On 9 January 1971 around 90 lesbians, gay men and some heterosexual supporters met in an Anglican church hall in Balmain. It was the first gathering of the Campaign Against Moral Persecution or CAMP, Australia's first homosexual rights organisation and the culmination of several months of quiet activism.

In July 1970, John Ware, a psychology student, and Christabell Poll, a public servant, discussed forming a small society to publicly counter the negative stereotyping of homosexuals in society at large. They were partly encouraged by media reports about the world's first gay pride march in New York, which had attracted thousands of participants. That march marked the first anniversary of the Stonewall riots, now regarded as the symbolic beginning of the gay liberation movement.

On 10 September 1970, the Australian newspaper published a small article announcing the formation of the new group, Campaign Against Moral Persecution or CAMP. Nine days later, the same newspaper published a much larger feature, "Couples" by Janet Hawley, about John, Christabel, their partners and their reasons for forming CAMP, complete with photographs.

This was the first time homosexuals had voluntarily and publicly identified themselves in Australia. It was a brave act, at a time when attitudes to homosexuality were extremely hostile. Harassment and violence against people suspected of being homosexual was common. Consensual adult homosexual activity was illegal, attracting long gaol sentences. Homosexuality was classified as a mental illness, with some medical practitioners offering electric shock therapy and lobotomies as "cures".

Many people contacted John and Christabell asking how they could help or become involved. The January gathering provided one opportunity. A more formal meeting was held the following month, effectively CAMP's first annual general meeting. Within 12 months, similar groups were established in Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide and on several University campuses.

Many of the people who became involved in CAMP were willing to publicly identify themselves as gay or lesbian – particularly in the media – in order to break down inaccurate stereotypes of homosexuals. They included Ian Black, who chaired the first public meeting and was interviewed on 2GB; Peter Bonsall-Boone, who had arranged the venue for CAMP's first gathering and his partner Peter de Waal who appeared in ABC-TV's groundbreaking documentary series, Chequerboard; and Lex Watson who subsequently took part in an ABC-TV Monday Conference filmed in Mount Isa.

Public discussion about homosexual law reform was also occurring beyond CAMP. In May 1970, then Federal Attorney-General Tom Hughes publicly spoke in favour of decriminalising homosexuality as part of new criminal codes for the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory. One consequence was a preselection challenge the following year from a conservative Liberal state MP, Jim Cameron, later an ally of Rev. Fred Nile in the NSW Legislative Council.

On 6 October 1971 around 80 members of CAMP gathered outside the then Liberal Party offices in Ash Street where the preselection meeting was being held. It was the first gay rights demonstration in Australia.

It was a festive occasion. Demonstrators held placards with comments such as "I am a lesbian and beautiful", "Advance Australian fairies" and "Don't let a wowser spoil the party". Others held helium filled balloons, which they later gave to preselectors to take home to their children. Hughes survived the challenge but did not contest the 1972 election.

Apart from public activism CAMP's activities expanded to include publishing a magazine, CAMP INK, and operating club rooms at 33A Glebe Point Road. In 1973, some CAMP members began "Phone a Friend" a gay-friendly telephone helpline, which still continues as the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service.

CAMP's early advocacy encouraged vital community discussion that was the necessary precursor to important legal and social reforms. CAMP's work, later taken up by other activists and community groups, ultimately led to anti-discrimination and anti-vilification legislation, homosexual law reform, the legal recognition of same sex relationships, legislation to allow same sex couples to adopt children and in 2017, marriage equality.

CAMP's formation also paved the way for other openly gay and lesbian community media, sporting and cultural organizations to be established. Significantly, the idea of holding a gay Mardi Gras was first suggested by CAMP member Ron Austin, during an informal conversation one evening after a meeting at CAMP. The resulting event on 24 June 1978 has grown into the largest night time LGLBTIQ+ parade in the world.

The example set by the early CAMP activists has made it possible for lesbians and gay men in all walks of life to live open and honest lives in a society that is less hostile and more accepting than it was 50 years ago. It has also led to a broader movement and community which embraces people who identify as trans*, bisexual, non-binary and queer.

To mark this significant anniversary a plaque will be installed in Ash Street, Sydney to mark the location of the first gay rights demonstration in Australia.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Phelps –

It is resolved that Council:

- (A) note the formation of the Campaign Against Moral Persecution as the symbolic birth of the Australian gay and lesbian movement, the significance of CAMP to Australia's gay and lesbian communities and its vital contribution to Australia becoming an accepting and inclusive society;
- (B) note that the first gay rights demonstration in Australia was held in Ash Street, Sydney on 6 October 1971;
- (C) note that a plaque will be installed in Ash Street, Sydney to mark this significant event; and
- (D) commend the commitment and courage of the early gay and lesbian activists who carried out the lesbian and gay movement's important work in its early years, often in a hostile environment.

Carried unanimously.

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