

# THE CONVERSATION

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A plush toy with the acronym LGBT lies on the ground during an anti-LGBT rally in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Hotli Simanjuntak/AAP

## Friday essay: exhilaration and fear – Dennis Altman on the global gay rights divide

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Earlier this year I visited Italy to mark the re-translation of my first book, [Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation](#) (published in 1972). An attempt to explain the emergence of gay liberation, the book grew out of my involvement in New York's early gay movement, which exploded after a police raid on a gay bar, the Stonewall, in 1969.

There was something moving and humbling about talking to audiences, many of whom were not born when I wrote that book, more so because I do not speak Italian and was largely dependent on interpreters. In all four cities where I spoke, audiences ranged widely across age and sexual and gender identities. Some were veterans of the early Italian gay movement, others just discovering a queer milieu.

Reflecting on the world in which I wrote my book, and the changes that have occurred since, I turned to the words of the late civil rights activist [Martin Luther King](#). "The arc of the moral universe is long," said King, "but it bends towards justice."

Certainly, in countries like Australia, this statement feels persuasive. Who would have imagined back in 1972 that the most trusted politician in the country would be an openly lesbian Asian woman? Or that the prime minister would lead a Pride march across the Sydney Harbour Bridge? Of course there are still people on the margins who struggle for acceptance. While we now have large, well-funded queer community organisations, they often overlook the most marginalised, as is the case for queer refugees and asylum seekers.



Our most popular politician, Penny Wong. Mick Tsikas/AAP

But King's words seemed less apposite in Italy, now the least progressive country in Western Europe, with a government committed to defending "family values", as long as the family is understood in conventional heterosexual terms. Italy has civil unions rather than same-sex marriage, and while abortion is legal, the Meloni government is seeking to restrict access to it.

In Italy, I was struck by the vigour of the queer cultural and intellectual world, but also by how few resources are available for its queer community compared to Australia. Nowhere in the country is there anything equivalent to Melbourne's grandiose Victorian Pride Centre or the government-supported QTopia museum in Sydney.

Meanwhile, in other European countries, such as Russia and Hungary, authoritarian leaders Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban are making attacks on "gender ideology" and decrying "LGBT ideology". Russia's supreme court banned the "LGBT movement" last November, and several courts have convicted people for displaying "extremist" rainbow symbols.

In African nations such as Uganda, and, closer to home, in Indonesia, new laws target queer sexuality. And earlier this year, Iraq passed a law imposing a sentence of 10 to 15 years for same-sex relations.



Men arrested in a raid of a gay party in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 2020. Tatan Syuflana/AAP

## Australia's arc

It is now more than half a century since people whose sexuality and gender identity falls outside the conventions of hegemonic masculinity (to use sociologist Raewyn Connell's evocative phrase) began organising politically in Australia.

While Sydney's Mardi Gras is the best-known expression of queer politics, it was preceded by the foundation of the first major gay group, CAMP, in 1970, and an explosion of groups and demonstrations before the infamous march down Oxford Street in 1978 that became Mardi Gras.

By this time there were gay groups across the country. At this point we used the word gay to include women as much as men and were remarkably unaware of the significance of trans identities. A gay and lesbian press had begun to flourish. American influences were strong, whether through imported books and magazines or the big mural of San Francisco on the wall of one of Oxford's Street's discos. In today's world of instant online hookups, I suspect there is more casual sex than ever, but we have lost the sense that it is striking a blow for liberation, part of the mythology we carved out for ourselves in the '70s.

For a few years then, there was a flurry of gay stories on television, most significantly the character played by the actor Joe Hasham in the series Number 96. I had the great fortune to launch the Australian edition of my book on a 50-minute ABC interview show – Monday Conference (a precursor to Q&A). I faced the half-hearted homophobia of a Protestant minister and a future Liberal politician.

Within a few years, lesbians felt an increasing need to move away from gay men and establish their own networks and publications. The 1970s were in some ways the golden age of the gay and lesbian movement and what most struck me in Italy was the sense among younger activists of having missed out on those years.

There was a strong sense of energy and camaraderie in the '70s as we battled for acceptance, both legal and social. Decriminalisation of homosexuality came slowly in Australia – it began in South Australia in 1975, with Tasmania the last holdout, forced to remove its sodomy laws in 1994.

For homosexual men, at least, the golden age ended with reports at the beginning of the 1980s of a new and fatal disease, originally called Gay Related Immune Deficiency, soon replaced by the term AIDS. Over the following 15 years, until the invention of effective anti-retroviral drugs in 1996, a diagnosis of HIV was an almost certain predictor of the collapse of the immune system, leading to death. For a time, AIDS seemed to end the period of casual carefree sex.

Still, Australia was fortunate to have a progressive government that understood the need to involve the groups most at risk of the new disease in combating it. During the second half of the 1980s, Australia stood out for its success in curbing the spread of HIV, aided by both community organisations and a few determined Liberals who insisted the response should be bipartisan. AIDS laid the groundwork for the creation of a new group of professional queers, who operate today rather as other professional lobbyists and fundraisers do.



A Melbourne AIDS memorial quilt, now heritage listed. Thorne Harbour Health/AAP

As the focus for gay men remained fixed on AIDS and decriminalisation, lesbians often found themselves caught between gay and women's politics. Some moved to a position of lesbian separatism. Others sought to build broader alliances. Trans people were even less visible in the gay movement.

Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble in 1990*. Although the book was far more widely attributed than actually read, it signalled new ways of understanding gender – as performative and more than a reflection of bodily attributes. These ideas continue to reverberate today.

At the same time, queer theory emerged in the United States, a move I initially criticised as the product of postmodern theory and frustration at the apparent conservative turn of the Reagan years. I was recently taken to task for my comments by my Italian translators and ironically I now far prefer the term “queer” to the clumsy alphabetical list that aims to incorporate all forms of sexual and gender diversity.

If we need a catch-all phrase, I would use that of the United Nations Human Rights Committee: “sexual orientation and gender identity” (SOGI).

By the beginning of this century, there was growing acceptance the old rules of hegemonic masculinity were no longer dominant in Australia. The Keating government had ended the ban on homosexuals serving in the military; anti-discrimination laws increasingly recognised SOGI, although with the still vexed question of exemptions based on religious doctrine; there was increasing legal recognition of trans people and the right to claim one’s preferred gender.

In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to recognise same-sex marriage. Australia would lag behind 20 countries in accepting this. An expensive national postal vote returned a strong majority in favour of changing the marriage laws. I think the postal vote was a positive step: while it was hurtful for some queers, there was something extraordinarily positive in the widespread rallying of support, and the final vote surprised many people with a majority supporting change in parts of the country assumed to be the most homophobic, such as northwest Tasmania and coastal Queensland.



Supporters of same-sex marriage celebrate the victory of the YES vote in the marriage equality survey at a street party in Sydney in 2017. Danny Casey/AAP

Despite my own cynicism about marriage, the vote had become a much larger indicator of acceptance of sexual diversity, even if it meant presenting an overly respectable image of happy monogamous couples, just like the ones in 1950s TV land. The postal vote created a situation almost impossible to reverse, unlike the 2015 Supreme Court ruling in the US on same-sex marriage, which may well fall victim to a future Trump-dominated court.

The then Turnbull government promised to introduce legislation protecting religious freedom, which two successive governments have so far failed to deliver. The key stumbling block appears to be whether religious schools have the right to dismiss queer staff and students. Too often, freedom of religion is taken to mean freedom to discriminate, as long as it is done with reference to some form of sacred text.

Since 2016, over a dozen countries have recognised same-sex marriage, most recently Thailand, where the legislation is now awaiting royal assent. But while we were celebrating marriage, queers in most of the world were facing far greater issues.

## **The wider world**

At the end of the 1980s, the federal government paid for several study tours for AIDS activists from southeast Asia, just as regional and international community HIV networks were emerging.

I have vivid memories of a meeting in a bitterly cold Paris where the International Council of AIDS Service Organisations was born; of the gay caucus at a regional HIV meeting in Delhi that met in a park because the organisers refused us space in the official venue; of sitting at an early AIDS Conference in Morocco where gay men said they switched from Arabic to French when they wanted to talk about sex.

In part because of the attention the AIDS epidemic brought to sexuality, SOGI issues started to be raised in official international forums.

Under pressure from a few Latin American and European countries, UN bodies started to tentatively recognise sexuality and gender identity as part of human rights. In 2016, the [Human Rights Council](#) agreed to appoint an independent expert to report on violence and discrimination against people based on their sexuality or gender identity. The position has been reaffirmed twice since then, each time by a fairly narrow vote of the council.

In many countries, these moves led to progressive shifts in policy. Most significant, perhaps, was the decision of the Indian Supreme Court to overrule existing sodomy laws in 2018, followed by Singapore and several Caribbean counties in 2022. In other states, a combination of religious and political authoritarianism led to increasing repression and denunciation of anyone who seemed to flout “traditional values”.

One of the sad ironies of this debate is how many countries freed from colonial rule have not merely kept old colonial laws regulating sexuality, but have gone beyond them in creating new penalties.

Across what was British Africa there have been viciously homophobic laws enacted, leading to persecution, arrests and even murder. The best known examples [come from Uganda](#), where a harsh anti-gay law passed last year threatens punishment of death for some perceived offences, and calls for life in prison for anyone engaging in same-sex relations.

 A man at a protest march.

A Ugandan man at a gay pride celebration in Entebbe in 2014. Rebecca Vassie/AAP

Similarly draconian laws are being proposed in Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana. There are some notable exceptions, most recently in Namibia, where the High Court overruled [the colonial anti-sodomy laws](#).

Eight years ago in our book *Queer Wars*, [my colleague Jon Symons and I posited](#) a growing polarisation around SOGI rights, running counter to optimistic assumptions that human rights might ultimately be globalised. Governments and religious leaders, we suggested, have used resistance to these rights to cast themselves as defenders of traditional values against neo-colonial interference and western decadence.

Sadly what we wrote then is even more striking today, with politicians such as Putin, Uganda's president Yoweri Museveni and former Brazilian leader Jair Bolsonaro making attacks on "gender ideology" – often shorthand for trans and homophobia – central to their rhetoric. Putin has even justified the war on Ukraine as [stemming from western-imposed concepts of LGBT rights](#).

A gay rights activist stands with a rainbow flag, in front of journalists, during a protest in St Petersburg, Russia, in 2015. AAP

In our region, Indonesia has a very deep tradition of understanding sexual and gender diversity. But it has seen similar attacks [in recent years](#).

In December 2022, the Indonesian parliament passed a new criminal code making consensual sex outside of marriage a criminal offence. Human Rights Watch claims this code violates the rights of women, religious minorities [and SOGI people](#). Same-sex couples cannot marry in Indonesia, so this clause also effectively renders all same-sex conduct illegal.

The most comprehensive survey of current legal and state-sanctioned discrimination against SOGI persons is found in the annual reports of The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association. As if echoing Martin Luther King's words, its [2024 report warns](#): "The Road to Equality is not Straight".

The [report found](#) homophobia was on the rise in parts of Africa and the Middle East, and warned even when criminal sanctions are removed, there remain many areas where discrimination exists on the basis of sexuality or gender identity.

In Australia, our obsession with the US means we are often unaware of developments closer to home. But American cultural influence is ubiquitous, and a Trump victory later this year would undoubtedly energise the push against "gender ideology" here, as elsewhere. (If re-elected, Trump [has vowed](#) to tackle "left-wing gender insanity" and pass a law recognising just two genders.)

It might seem strange that even today, coming out as other than sexually or gender conforming can be as daunting as it was when we were widely seen as criminal, sick and sinful. But we know this is the experience of many young people despite the massive changes we have experienced in Australia.

Visiting Italy reminded me these changes cannot be taken for granted: sometimes the arc of progress seems more like a boomerang.

## **A melancholia**

Italy now lags behind once deeply conservative Catholic countries such as Ireland and Spain, which have shaken off the clergy's grip and recognise same-sex marriage. In Italy, the Pope still holds court in Rome, while the once powerful Communist Party has virtually disappeared and the left is weak.

A gay pride event in Rome this month. CLAUDIO PERI/AAP

In the various spaces where I spoke – the Antigone bookshop in Milan, the community centre set in the old walls of Bologna, the Liguria Pride centre in Genoa – I sensed the same exhilaration and fear that marked the early days of gay liberation. Republishing a book written over half a century ago had seemed to me an exercise in nostalgia, rather like the constant reliving of the first Mardi Gras for its participants in Sydney.

“No,” observed my very smart friend and patron, Lorenzo Bernini, one of Italy's leading queer scholars. “It is melancholy. We look back to a revolutionary era we were too young to be part of.”

The melancholia is not simply about acceptance. It is rather a longing for a time when radical change towards a more equitable and just society seemed possible.

Gay Liberation saw itself as part of a broader movement re-imagining society. That vision has been lost in the flurry of commercial sponsorships and political blessings now dominating events like Mardi Gras and Melbourne's Midsumma festival.

In today's world, where populist authoritarianism is on the rise, revolutionary change no longer seems possible. We have developed a successful mainstream queer movement, but at the cost of the larger ambitions of our radical foundation.