

# Queer Action

## Loud, proud and taking on the system!

There is a new era of open class conflict in Australia which began with the election of the Howard Government in March 1996. In many social movements, leaders who had grown very comfortable in their role as collaborators with the Keating Government were forced to make a choice — lead a fight or retreat. Many failed the test.

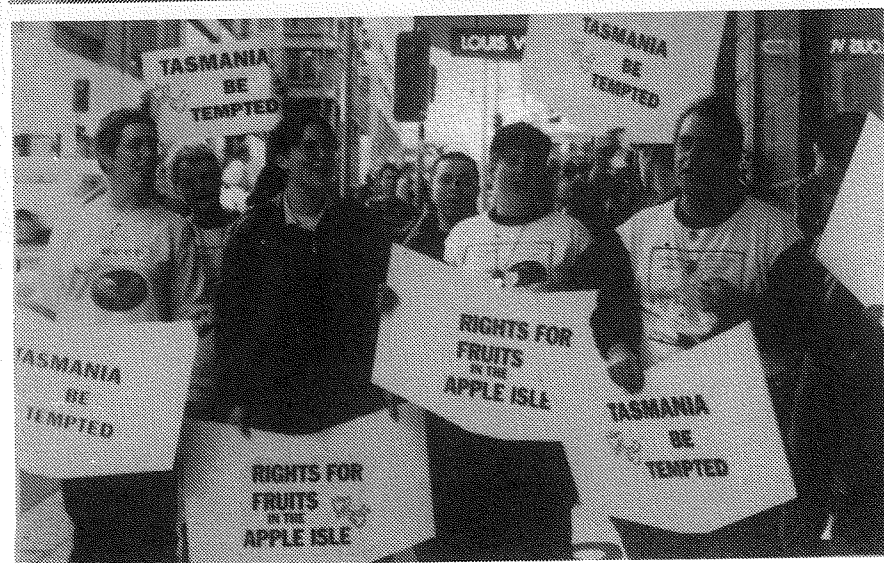
There is a growing political polarisation in the lesbian and gay community. Last year, *Sydney Star Observer* ran a major feature article identifying a new trend — the openly gay conservative. Many of the gay entrepreneurs who've grown wealthy on pink dollars have turned their backs on the radical struggle which created the communities they've profited from. They claim to be moderate and responsible leaders. They promote the gay community as a great niche market and good for business!

But the good news is the emergence of several new radical and activist organisations. These groups are as angry about the conservative role of the leadership and the discrimination and exploitation *within* the community, as the constant barrage of homophobia from outside. In West Australia, Queer Radicals grew out of efforts to inject more radical demands into the annual lesbian and gay pride parade. In Victoria, Queer Action formed out of a fight about tactics and democracy within a coalition which organised a successful *Gay Rights Before States Rights* rally in support of Tasmanian gay activists last September.

Jill Polsen spoke to Daniel Sammut and Daryl Croke from Queer Action about the group.

*How did Queer Action get started?*

**Daniel:** Queer Action started in September 1996 from a protest against Jeff Kennett's support for Tasmanian anti-gay laws. A group of about ten people who came from Gays and Lesbians Against Discrimination decided we needed a new group to tackle homophobia.



**Daryl:** We passed a list around the demonstration indicating that it was necessary to build a new group. The group was originally called Radical Queers, and we had a meeting the following week. At that meeting we decided to change the name to Queer Action. We thought that Radical Queers reflected who we are but didn't indicate what we wanted to do — change things through action.

**Daniel:** The new name of the group reflects our political character. The term "queer" represents an acknowledgement of diversity. Diversity of sexuality and diversity of our political focus. We are campaigning around more than just sexuality.

*Why is a group like Queer Action necessary?*

**Daniel:** We're getting a good response: there aren't many groups willing to effectively fight homophobia. We also want to build links with people fighting against all other forms of bigotry and oppression. For example, there is also a lot of racism both within the community and outside the community that we must deal with. So a group like Queer Action is necessary, because we need to organise to fight against homophobia, heterosexism and oppression.



Top left: Debbie Brennan represents Radical Women at the *Gay Rights Before States Rights* rally. Queer Action sprang from this organising. *Photo by Peter Murray.*

Bottom left: Lesbian & Gay Solidarity Group in Sydney storm Tasmania's Bastille at a July 14 1994 protest outside the Tasmanian Tourist Bureau. The struggle against Tasmania's repressive laws continues to radicalise the movement. *Photo by Kendall Lovett.*

Above: Transsexuals march in Melbourne's Pride March, January 1996. Tranny radicals play an important role in Queer Action. *Photo by Peter Murray.*

**Daryl:** There are two reasons. One is because there needs to be an overtly political group — a left wing group that is capable of organising campaigns and demonstrations with the sort of militancy that earlier groups like ACT-UP did. There is also a need for people who identify as being radical within the Queer community to be in some sort of formation to express and develop our ideas and push the boundaries of politics.

*What problems do you see with the mainstream lesbian and gay movement leadership?*

**Daniel:** There is not enough grassroots activity to challenge the leaders and make it clear that we will not trade our rights in return for funding from pink dollar entrepreneurs. And the only way we can act effectively is through people getting together to fight rather than hoping that someday, somewhere, someone is going to do it on our behalf. The leadership is based on money and management. It tends to be undemocratic. A group like Queer Action will allow a diversity of people with a sense of politics to work to change things.

**Daryl:** The key question in my mind is: should we accept things as they are and work within the confines of the system — which is what the gay leadership advocates — or should we organise to win liberation and try to change the world? For many people, those questions are off the agenda. Queer Action wants to put this discussion firmly back on the agenda, right now.

*What has Queer Action achieved so far?*

**Daniel:** We went to a demonstration against Pauline Hanson. We also went to the Reclaim the Night demonstration. We had an action against the sexist and racist door policy at the Peel Hotel. It was very successful, with over 100 people showing up. They expressed their anger that pink business proprietors are attempting to deny people access to venues. We held a forum where we got 50 people along to debate what the queer community is and what it means to be part of this community. Does it mean being political or does it mean being a consumer?

**Daryl:** We have formed a viable self-sustaining group which, in the current political environment, is an achievement in itself. We hope to act as an inspiration for others. We've established contacts with groups interstate who are moving in a similar direction.

*What do you hope to achieve?*

**Daniel:** We want to sustain a group, unite people around radical politics and open up debate and dialogue with different people. We want to make sure that next time a government tries to do something like close down Fairfield [the public hospital in Melbourne which provided quality specialist HIV services], there is an effective response. The fight for effective equal opportunity legislation is also important.

**Daryl:** The short term aim is to put politics back into the queer community. One way is to generate debates. The action we had against the Peel generated a vibrant debate about the pink economy. On a larger scale, we need to act as an organising force against significant attacks and to show people that there are people in the queer community who are quite willing to come out over issues that aren't traditionally seen as queer issues. A real problem we've got within the community is that organising has been limited to a very narrowly defined range of issues.

*What are your immediate priorities?*

**Daniel:** We want to be seen outside the community by going to suburban areas and other areas that aren't traditionally seen as being gay or lesbian. We can have kiss-ins in the city centre, do paste ups and graffiti runs

and other things to get out the message that there are people who have different lifestyles. We'll confront homophobia wherever it appears. We want to campaign against Jeff Kennett's continued support for Tasmania's anti-gay laws and we want equal opportunity legislation that is not full of loopholes. We plan to put out a magazine of different ideas and political comment.

*Who should get involved and how?*

**Daryl:** Queer Action is about diversity, focussing our political ideas and changing things for the better. We meet on the 1st and 3rd Thursday of every month at 7.00 pm at the Union Club Hotel. People should get involved if they want to make a political commitment to fight compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia and all other bigotry as well. Queer Action is not about how many people you've slept with or your sexual preference, it is about political convictions.

**Daniel:** Queer Action wants to encourage people to get involved. Our direction now is to cause dissent and make change. We haven't got a monolithic notion of what it means to be queer or what type of action should be done. The group will make decisions through a democratic process. The three defining features of Queer Action are being radical, being active and being political. We stand for politics and pride. ▼

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*There is no silence deep  
enough*

*No blackout dark enough  
No corruption thick enough  
No business deal big enough  
No politicians bent enough  
No heart hollow enough  
No grave wide enough  
To bury your story  
And keep it from us  
Love from a short distance.*

Australian techno musicians, Soma, set Bono's text to music, and the result is a musically spectacular and politically forceful statement. The track is a unique blend of the traditional and modern. The strong techno beat signifies the strength, tenacity and courage of the East Timorese people. Mixed with the ultra-modern electronic music is the track, "Oan Kiak", as performed

by East Timorese elder, Mariano Abrantes, on *All in the Family*.

Mr Abrantes was born in 1918 into a family of traditional musicians and drum makers. After being forced to leave Timor, he dedicated himself to teaching young Timorese of the diaspora the knowledge and traditions that he inherited. He argued that the East Timorese culture, having outlasted 500 years of Portuguese colonialism, will also survive the brutal Indonesian occupation.

The opening track of *Love From a Short Distance*, "Kakei", was recorded in Melbourne just days before Mr Abrantes' death in June 1996. The track, sung in the Tetum language, has a haunting quality. The informative and beautifully designed cover notes explain: "*the Kakei is played after the burial of a family member, along with songs*

*which remember the good times. It is played in the early hours of the morning to remember the dead. Legend has it that the first Kakei was made by an orphan — Oan Kiak — who, upon finding some metal, decided to create an instrument, to express his loneliness, and the many hardships faced as an orphan*".

The deep solidarity between the indigenous people of Australia and the East Timorese is reflected in the collection. Christine Anu, the enormously popular Torres Strait Island performer, contributed "Monkey and the Turtle" from her album, *Stylin' Up*.

My favourite track is "Timor" by Yothu Yindi. This catchy number features great harmonies and the distinctive voice of Mandaway Yunupingu. You can't miss the refrain "*Freedom for East Timor,*