

Peter Murphy

## Building up to Sydney's first gay and lesbian Mardi Gras

1978 turned out to be a very exciting year. At the end of January I became unemployed when my job as a NSW organiser for the Australian Union of Students was abolished. While looking for work I became a volunteer researcher at the newly formed Transnational cooperative, focusing on the maritime industry. By the end of the year I was wondering when I would recover from the physical and psychological traumas from my participation in the gay and lesbian movement and the anti-apartheid campaigns.

I turned 25 in April, and looked back on four and a half years since I had decided not to renew my vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in the Divine Word Missionaries, a Catholic religious order where I had been training to be a priest. I had completed an undergraduate degree with honours from Macquarie University in anthropology and sociology in 1976, and then worked for most of 1977 for AUS.

In February 1975 I had joined the Communist Party of Australia, mainly motivated by the shocking realities about Australian society I had witnessed in Alice Springs in December 1974, while taking part in a summer school to learn elementary Pitjantjatjara language with some friends. If this wasn't enough motivation, then the Liberal Party mobilisation against the Whitlam Labor government in early 1975 pushed me over the line from thoughtful criticism to activism.

I attended the AUS National Conference at Monash University in January, with the help of a live-wire law student, Helen Golding, who had been in Alice Springs in December. There at Monash I had met some of her friends who were Sydney University communists. Helen Golding was a straight-up anarchist and feminist, who really respected everyone who worked for justice, whatever their particular political brand, and so she herself was an inspiration to me.

Back in Sydney, I moved from my house in West Lindfield, shared with two close friends who left the Divine Word Missionaries when I did, and moved into a small terrace house in Redfern, with Helen and her young daughter, Joanna, to help pay the rent.

Once in the Tertiary Education Branch of the CPA, I tried to be active in every way I could. This meant working in the Macquarie University Communist Club, helping to produce and distribute its newsletter, Red Menace, selling Tribune at Redfern Station, attending fortnightly branch meetings and taking part in the broader CPA campaigns. This meant a lot of paste-ups, both for student campaigns and broader political struggles. At the end of 1975 this became a daily routine, when we sold the Daily Tribune during the federal election campaign after Kerr sacked the Whitlam government.

Part of this process was engaging with the homosexual politics of some of my new student comrades. Both the CPA and the Australian Union of Students supported homosexuality as a 'right' – a positive, health alternative lifestyle choice! In reality, this meant lots of drinking and talking, as well as taking part in the campaigning.

At least by then I knew something about sex, but my new milieu was friendly, non-pressured, and open about so many issues, and for me, sex and sexuality was so important – so this was a time of high-speed learning.

My first homosexual encounter had been in 1974, with an older man who was a devout Catholic. He was very kind, but had no attitude about an ongoing loving relationship, something I just couldn't grasp at the time.

I did respond to an older woman that year, and we had a warm and intense love for a year and a half. But it foundered on my quite naïve experimentation with other people in the relatively free sexual atmosphere of student and left politics in 1975. That included homosexuality. My friend broke off with me and commenced her own lesbian lifestyle! In my turn, I was approached by an older married man, and we became lovers for several years.

In 1975, a homosexual students caucus, in which CPA members played a part, organised the first National Homosexual Conference in Melbourne through the Australian Union of Students, and I attended. The conference was intense and exuberant, as people felt their strength as a movement. The misogyny of most gay men was a real problem and conflict between political lesbians and gays was a big issue. We communists opposed lesbian separatism, and instead agitated for gay men to oppose sexism as a basis for unity between lesbians and gay men. We linked sexism to capitalism. The next National Homosexual Conference was in Sydney in 1976, and again I could take part. The third was in Adelaide in 1977 and the fourth was to be in Sydney later in that fateful year of 1978.

Meanwhile, in 1976, my comrade Craig Johnston in the CPA Tertiary Education Branch had persuaded the Sydney District Committee, of which I was a member, to have a 'homosexual education' program for all the party branches. He and I then went and spoke to many comrades, in industrial and local branches, in a matter-of-fact way, about what the basic issues were for gay people and how it fitted into the CPA's democratic program and vision for a socialist Australia. This was a very positive process.

During 1976 and 1977, we participated in several gay rights demonstrations in Sydney, which took the form of a rally at Town Hall Square and a march down George Street, then up Market Street to Hyde Park. Participation in these marches was in the hundreds. There was always an electric atmosphere, because the media would cover these events, and for many participants, this was how they 'came out' as gay or lesbian. We communists were always in the front of these rallies, which were in fact organised under 'Sydney Gay Liberation'. We had our own ethos, that we should be out in front for what we believed in, but SGL was diverse in its politics and only a minority were socialists. Again, inspired mainly by Craig Johnston, the gay communists and some others created the Sydney Lesbians and Homosexuals in 1976 and issued a manifesto linking gay oppression with women's oppression and capitalist power. This was aimed at offsetting the weight of conservative politics in CAMP (Campaign Against Moral Persecution), the biggest political grouping in the Sydney gay scene, and attracting more radical young lesbians and gays into activism.

Back at Sydney University where I worked in 1977, gay bashing and abuse of lesbians by right wing student groups, often led by Tony Abbott, was just part of the broader combat between left and right. Gay student groups were formed on some campuses, echoing the women's groups that had been active for most of the 1970s. These groups mainly created a space for young people to talk about their sexual desires without getting abused, they were a buffer against the gay-bashers, and they tried to initiate political action to remove legal oppression of gays.

It was out of a number of trends that the Mardi Gras emerged. One was a move by Ken Davis and Ann Talve to organise support for the California Gay Pride day that year, against a powerful anti-gay rightwing movement there. We all went to Word is Out a US documentary at the Paris cinema and the US parade images there also inspired ideas of a street party event. People in CAMP supported it, as did the Sydney University gay student group and the CPA Homosexual Collective. In particular, Gary Bennett at Sydney University was a driving force, and I recall quite a few discussions with Ken Davis and Lance Gowland.

Even in 1976, we had been concerned that only hundreds would take part in a protest march against the laws that made gay male sex a criminal offence. We knew from the Kinsey Report that perhaps 10% of the population was homosexual, and that meant about 300,000 in Sydney alone!

These laws were a license to police and all sorts of other thugs to bash and abuse gays and lesbians, often to the point of murder. At a lower level of oppression, gays and lesbians suffered humiliation at work, discrimination in housing, in churches, and often suffered psychological suffering in their families. Even in the 1970s, gay men were being prescribed electrical shock therapy to 'cure' them of their 'disease'.

We had a very real experience of oppression at Macquarie University in 1975 when Jeremy Fisher, a student living at the Anglican Dunmore Lang College, tried to commit suicide due to the stresses arising from his homosexuality. The college responded in a very christian manner - they expelled him. Fortunately, the college was having extensions built at the time. Many of the workers were members of the Builders Laborers Federation, led by CPA and left ALP activists, and they went on strike until Jeremy was reinstated in the college. Such were the times!

Also in 1975, Michael Clohesy was sacked from his teaching job by the Catholic Education Office because he appeared on television to support the CAMP submission to the Royal Commission on Human Relationships. Michael had studied at Macquarie Uni.

In early 1978, I was unemployed, still a member of the Tertiary Education Branch of the CPA, and in the Homosexual Collective, but not on campus any more, and volunteering at a union-oriented research centre, the Transnational Cooperative.



I followed the discussion about the Mardi Gras idea through the early months of 1978. There was some disagreement about whether this idea was really 'political' enough, but the majority view was consistent - the Mardi Gras idea would create a space that was 'non-political' in a formal sense, but would still allow people to 'come out'. Unless gay people really came out in numbers, the politicians would never change the laws, we thought. The compromise was that when Stonewall Day came around, we would still have the political rally, still have the political forum about the issues, but we would also have the Mardi Gras in the evening. I supported this idea whenever I had the opportunity, but I was not an organiser of the event.

Stonewall Day was June 24, the anniversary of the first 'gay riot' in Greenwich Village, New York, in 1969, when the gays fought a pitched battle with police who were doing a 'routine' raid on the gay Stonewall Bar.

As I said, I wasn't an organiser that day. I didn't go to the march at lunchtime; I didn't go to the forum in the afternoon but I did finally opt for the Mardi Gras, only to find it had already arrived at Hyde Park. I was late! I walked into quite a night as a couple of thousand excited men and women came quickly around the corner into College Street, I saw police dragging Lance Gowland out of the driving seat of the sound truck while the music was still playing.

There were hasty consultations. Word spread fast that Hyde Park South was packed with police and we would be beaten up if we went in there, which was the designated end point of the parade. Many people were complaining that the police had completely ruined the parade by rushing it straight down Oxford Street, and that we should protest. But where to go? Kings Cross was a popular suggestion and the whole crowd started moving toward William Street. Lo and behold, when we got there, a large uniformed police officer was standing in the intersection and directing the crowd up William Street. The parade was now a protest march, the most popular chants were: "Stop police attacks - on gays, women and blacks!", "Get your laws off our bodies" and "Not the church, not the State, women will decide their fate!".

I found most of the Tertiary Education Branch and the Tin Sheds art crowd there and started talking about what would happen. As we hit the rise up to Kings Cross we could see a huge convoy of police paddy wagons with blue lights flashing proceed across Darlinghurst Road and into Kings Cross. I found the first public phone I could and called a household of lawyers to warn them of the volatile situation and that we would definitely need help. Then I rejoined the rear of the march, which was having a great reception from the late night crowd in the Cross. It was about 11 pm.

We reached the El Alamein Fountain without incident, but there we stopped to figure out what to do. There were police in all the side streets, it was ominous. We concluded that the safest way out was back down Darlinghurst Road and dispersal among the crowd there in the Cross near William Street. I can distinctly remember linking arms, on the one side with Michelle Martin, the other with Chips Mackinolty, the three of us very solid friends. We were in the middle of the quiet march back down the street, seeing the police vehicles in every street to right and left.

Then all of a sudden a searchlight hit our eyes, all the people in front were silhouettes. A paddy wagon was blocking the way, police were hurling people into vans, onto the ground. The three of us ran forward and I grabbed the arm of the first person I saw on the ground, and dragged the person to the left, away from the police. Unfortunately I ran straight into a police officer who grabbed me by an arm and swung me though the air straight into a paddy wagon. My glasses flew off on the way.

Inside there were already four people, a man and woman couple who were already complaining that they weren't even gay, two lesbians and me. In a few seconds, another comrade came flying in, Graham Chuck. A few things happened in that wagon and the couple managed to escape, but not the

rest of us. It was a police riot, and the poofers and dykes were fighting back, and the Kings Cross crowd was on our side. Garbage and garbage bins were flying. I had never seen anything like it, and neither had the police. Our wagon didn't move for over 40 minutes while the fighting swirled around us. I distinctly remember feeling very proud that we were fighting.

Unfortunately, when we got into the yard of the nearby Darlinghurst Police Station the other three were ordered out and I was ordered to stay, by a police officer contorted with rage. In a minute or two he and another came back to get me and walked me fast down a corridor past cells, around to the right and then right again into a room with some equipment stored in it. The angry cop, who turned out to be a former Australian javelin throwing champion, flogged me until I was convulsing and the other police officer called him off. Dragged back to a cell on my own I tried to clean myself up and grasp what had happened, and I could hear a large crowd outside chanting against the police bashing, calling for our release, calling out my name. I felt elated that people cared about me and fearful that the cops would come in and bash me some more.

It took hours to get into the dock, crammed in with over 20 others including Christine who had been in the paddy wagon with me. Then I was taken back into the police station to be examined by a doctor and a lawyer, in the presence of the most senior uniformed police officer I had ever seen. I was so glad to see Jim Walker, another real friend. He examined me and said I should be taken straight to hospital, but the police commander refused and I was taken back to the dock. I could barely walk. The people outside were still chanting for our release and about 4.30 am I was one for the first group to be bailed out. Meredith Burgmann put me straight in her car and took me to St Vincents casualty. After an hour when no one examined me, we decided to go. She took me to see Pat O'Shane, then a barrister, to get advice, and then I went home to sleep.

Many people thought I was hurt much more than I was, but I was in very bad shape. On the Monday morning I went to the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital and there I was x-rayed and checked over better. No broken bones. Very bad headaches. Very swollen leg. I had to be at the Magistrate's Court in Liverpool street at 10 am, and just made it. There was a protest and support crowd gathering and the police again went wild. They locked the court and started hurling people to the ground. I was punched in the head again. There had been 54 arrested on the Saturday night, but about seven more were arrested on Monday morning.

My lawyer was from Redfern Legal Centre and is now a judge. She advised me not to enter a plea until the arresting officers showed up. They didn't. It took two more appearances before they did, and as soon as we had their names I took out assault charges against them.

Meanwhile I had to give up my volunteer work for a while, give up selling Tribunes and try to recover. I felt that the bashing was a very severe attempt to make me stop being politically active, and so I was determined not to stop. I also felt it psychologically as a message that I was to blame for it, I had brought it all on myself, I was somehow bad and deserved it. I had to work my way through that too. I had the symptom of trauma where I dreamed day and night about the bashing repeatedly, and in my dreams and day dreams I always managed to beat up the police man. My head ached where it had been struck for many months. It took me about three years to feel I had recovered.

But in that time I went to the big meeting at the Stanley Palmer that developed the 'drop the charges' campaign, and I took part in the marches, difficult as it was.

One of Bob Hawke's daughters, Susan, was in Sydney then and arranged for a delegation to see the Premier, Neville Wran, to call for action against the police and for repeal of the laws against homosexuality. I was there as living evidence of the police brutality, but couldn't say much. The Premier walked out in a rage as soon as Susan produced a notebook! He did come back, but pleaded that he had done a lot to civilise things for gay people.

In the end, all the charges from that first Mardi Gras were dropped, except for me. I was prosecuted because I had the temerity to lay charges against the police. One woman later faced charges from the Mardi Gras because she was arrested along with 120 others at the 4th National Homosexual Conference in August and the police discovered she had used a false name in June. So two of us were prosecuted. I was found guilty in 1980 on three charges – taking part in an illegal procession, hindering police and resisting police. I appealed and in 1981 the illegal procession charge was overturned, but the other two convictions were upheld. By the time my charges against the police were listed, I was working on a ship and I was refused an adjournment until I could attend. So the charges were dismissed.

I had moved to Adelaide in April 1981, and took no further part in the organised gay movement in Sydney. I missed the great moment in 1984 when the campaign to repeal the anti-gay laws was victorious, apart from the discriminatory age of consent clause only recently withdrawn. Craig Johnston was a prominent leader in that phase of the campaign. He and Brian McGahen and Jack Munday were elected to the Sydney City Council that year.

I was there later in 1984 for the first public meeting, which was held in the Teachers Federation auditorium, to discuss the Aids epidemic and to create an organised response in the gay community. The Mardi Gras had moved to summer and the commercial gays had taken it over from the politicians. I attended many Lesbian and gay Mardi Gras from the second half of the 1980s, and was really proud to join with the 78ers for the great celebration in 1998

The gay liberation movement started by CAMP and then Gay Lib has been a bigger success than we ever imagined. Communists made a significant contribution to it and still do. One of those contributions was the Lesbian and Gay Mardi Gras, which, despite its many problems, remains true to its origins as a civil rights and social justice movement, full of irreverence, humour and fighting spirit, and still providing a vital social space for people to 'come out'.