

Chapter 5

FROM 'VICE' TO 'HOMOSEXUALITY': POLICING PERVERSION IN THE 1950S

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In the 1950s, homophobia was on the march. Across the Western world, homosexuality was demonised in new and more public ways, policing was intensified, the range of laws was expanded, and lesbians and gay men found themselves subject to greater vilification and discrimination than ever before. Homosexuals were presented as threats of various kinds: as security risks and agents of communism; above all as threats to children, to the community and to social order.

Any sensible observer, looking at the situation in the West in the late 1950s would have drawn the conclusion that homophobia was not merely here to stay, but was stronger than it had ever been, and likely to become stronger still into the foreseeable future. As we know, of course, this was not to be. By the end of the 1960s – that is, within a decade – homophobia was facing a challenge from a newly emerging politics (variously labelled as homophile, homosexual and gay) that would reverse the balance of power between homophobia and homosexuals in quite remarkable ways. Beginning in the late 1960s and through the following decades, the gay and lesbian rights movement, with its demands for equality, fairness and respect, challenged the traditional structures of sexuality and, in a series of victories – each more inevitable, and surprising, than the last – reduced homophobia to a shadow of its former self.

The origins of this homophile politics are to be found in the 1950s, too, though this is clear mostly with the benefit of hindsight. In organisations – Mattachine, One and the Daughters of Bilitis in

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'offensive behaviour', the maximum penalty for which was a fine of £5. It can hardly be a coincidence that the following year the NSW parliament amended the *Crimes Act* to make it absolutely certain that 'soliciting', 'inciting' or 'attempting to solicit or incite' between men was a crime. The changes also applied the law to 'any act of indecency', considerably expanding the scope of the law which to that point had encompassed buggery and indecent assault. And to top it off, the penalty – which under the *Vagrancy Act* had been six months jail – was doubled to 12 months.³⁷ Victoria undertook a similar extension of its laws in 1961, introducing an offence of 'homosexual soliciting' (becoming thereby one of the very few jurisdictions anywhere in the British world to use the word 'homosexual' in their laws).³⁸

The march of homophobia in 1950s Australia took place on many fronts, each of which needs to be understood on its own terms, reflecting the irreducible pluralism of the Australian social formation. In this case study of the place of policing in this process, recognising the need by police to more clearly identify the threat, in order to contain it, we can see the struggle on one such front. There is no substitute for this process of historical research and analysis and it is only by such fine-grained work that we can start to assemble a history of a nation and a period.

Notes

- 1 For a broader analysis of 1950s homophobia see, Graham Willett, 'The Darkest Decade: Homophobia in 1950s Australia', in John Murphy and Judith Smart (eds), *The Forgotten Fifties: Aspects of Australian Society and Culture in the 1950s*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), pp 120-132.
- 2 Garry Wotherspoon, 'City of the Plain': *History of a Gay Sub-Culture* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1991), p 109.
- 3 Clive Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows: The Development of a Gay and Lesbian Subculture in Queensland* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2001), p 127.
- 4 On Collinson and his attempt to establish a homosexual law reform society in Melbourne in the late 1950s, see Graham Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2000), pp 15-17.
- 5 The Statute of 1533 issued by Henry VIII, made sodomy (or buggery) an offence punishable by death.
- 6 *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 4th edn, 1951.

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- 7 Moore, *Sunshine and Rainbows*, pp 123-124.
- 8 'Sex Perverts on increase in SA', *News* (Adelaide), 14 March 1949.
- 9 Geoffrey R Dawson, 'Sex Offenders', letter, *News* (Adelaide), 26 May 1949.
- 10 'Prowling Pests are Menace in City Parklands', *Truth* (Melbourne), 28 January 1950.
- 11 'Truth Writes on a Nasty Theme', *Truth* (Melbourne), 15 October 1949.
- 12 Stephen Alomes, Mark Dober and Donna Hellier, 'The Social Context of Postwar Conservatism', in Ann Curthoys and John Merritt (eds), *Australia's First Cold War 1945-1953, Vol 1, Society, Communism and Culture* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), pp 1-28.
- 13 For a view of the Call from a gay history perspective see Wotherpoon, 'City of the Plain', pp 112-113. It is also discussed in Stella Lees and June Senyard, *The 1950s: How Australia Became a Modern Society, and Everyone got a House and a Car* (Melbourne: Hyland Press, 1987), pp 36-37 (where the full text is reproduced).
- 14 For this and the following see Patrick Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), pp 231-246.
- 15 Anthea Goddard, 'The Spreading Cult of the Homosexual', *People*, 25 January 1956, pp 19-21.
- 16 'Concern Over Perversion', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 1951.
- 17 'Homosexual Menace in Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1958.
- 18 'Vice Squad Ordered to Rid Sydney of Male Perverts (Growing "Cancer")', *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 December 1953.
- 19 'New Vice Squad Work', *Truth* (Melbourne), 17 August 1957.
- 20 Australia, *Commonwealth Yearbook*, annual, 1939-60.
- 21 'Homosexual Menace', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1958.
- 22 'This Boy is Damned!', *Truth* (Melbourne), 21 July 1956.
- 23 'Vice Squad Ordered to Rid Sydney of Male Perverts (Growing "Cancer")', *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 December 1953.
- 24 'New Vice Squad Work' *Truth* (Melbourne), 17 August 1957.
- 25 Victoria Police, *Annual Report*, 1956, 1957, 1958.
- 26 'Vice Squad Ordered to Rid Sydney of Male Perverts' (Growing "Cancer")', *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 December 1953.
- 27 'Sexual Offences', *Australian Police Journal*, January 1959, pp 90-93.
- 28 For this and the following David K Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
- 29 Kate Davison, *Pinks Under the Bed*, Honours thesis, History Department, University of Melbourne, 1995, pp 25, 30-33.

- 30 A Sydney Psychiatrist, 'The Problem of the Sexual Misfit' *AM*, 24 November 1953, p 5.
- 31 'This Boy is Damned!', *Truth* (Melbourne), 21 July 1956.
- 32 Davison, *Pinks Under the Bed*, pp 21-23; the quote is from pp 22-23.
- 33 'This Boy is Damned!', *Truth* (Melbourne), 21 July 1956.
- 34 'Big Melb Names in Vice Net', *Truth* (Melbourne), 28 July 1956.
- 35 'Vice Squad Ordered to Rid Sydney of Male Perverts (Growing "Cancer")', *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 December 1953.
- 36 Wotherspoon, '*City of the Plain*', pp 116-117.
- 37 *Ibid*, pp 116-118.
- 38 Victoria, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol 263, pp 2200ff and 2408ff.