

A march against fear

By JOHN STAPLETON

"We're here, we're queer, better get used to it."

This was chanted along King Street, Newtown, on a recent Sunday by 600 marchers against gay and lesbian violence.

As traffic stopped and curious shopkeepers stood watching from their doorways, protesters blew whistles normally used in case of assault, waved placards and held hands.

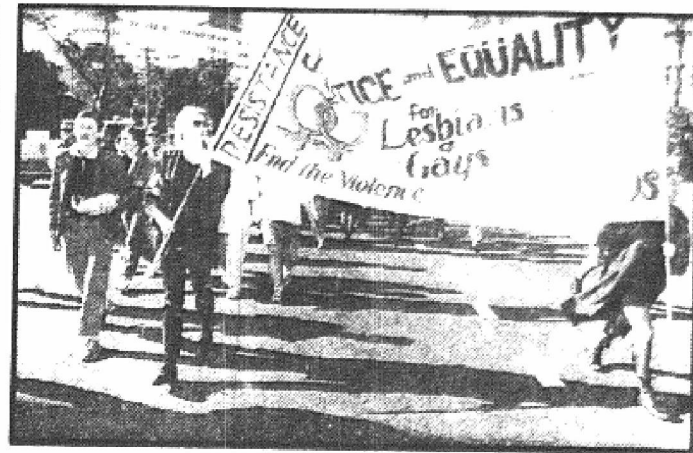
Organisers said it was the first gay and lesbian march in Newtown. Groups included Lesbians on the Loose, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Dykes on Bikes, Gay and Lesbian Street Patrols, Rights for Male Sex Workers and the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby.

At the end of the march, in Camperdown Memorial Park, speakers condemned violence against gays, and there was a demonstration on self-defence.

A member of Dykes on Bikes, Ms Nora Short, said: "I lost seven friends in a year from AIDS. Gays don't need the additional stress of not being



Sonja Bijl, left, and others who marched against anti-gay violence.



Pictures by DEAN WILMOT

able to walk from one venue to another without being bashed, of not being able to have a good time for whatever time is left. That is why I got involved."

Members of one group, mostly heterosexuals, adorned themselves with red "blood" and carried placards, such as "This Could Be Your Daughter".

One supporter, Ms Sonja Bijl, 20, of Surry Hills, said she was

there because: "I get hassled. My friends get hassled. It affects our lives. We have to stop it. I am sure a lot of heterosexual people feel the same."

An organiser from the Gay Solidarity Group, Mr Michael Schembri, said violence against gay men and lesbians was a daily reality.

"The struggle against homo-hatred is being carried out on

many levels," he said, "including street patrolling, community mobilisation and education.

"Marching is a way of asserting power, of going out and doing something, giving us confidence. It is extremely important for each and every one of us to be seen in public as gays and lesbians who are standing up against violence."

One woman, Kimberly, who would not give her second name for work reasons, said as many women as men turned out for the march because violence against lesbians is as savage and prevalent as against gay men.

"Women understand on a fundamental level that street fear of being frightened by groups of young men, that fear of open deserted spaces.

"They know their attackers are rarely caught or prosecuted, that their attackers get bolder, their hunting techniques improve.

"When I first heard of a friend being bashed, I realised on a very personal level that I was as much an object of hatred as a gay man."

\$55,000 allocated to curb gay bashings

By STEPHEN LONG

The Greiner Government has moved to garner support from the gay community in Bligh, announcing a scheme to reduce street violence against homosexuals.

The Minister for Health, Mr Collins, announced on Tuesday that he had allocated \$55,000 to the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby which, together with the Anti-Discrimination Board, has developed a strategy to combat gay-hate violence.

He said he had done so after receiving representations from Ms

Carol Dance, the Liberal Party candidate for Bligh.

The scheme will involve a community awareness program, a whistle-blowing and self-defence strategy, violence prevention education targeted at schools through workshops and seminars, and training for health, community and police staff.

Gay supporters of the Independent MP for Bligh, Ms Clover Moore, have criticised the move's timing, describing it as blatant "electioneering".

According to the co-convenor of

the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, Mr Bruce Grant, the strategy was worked out in March — more than two months before the announcement.

However, Mr Grant would not be drawn on the timing of the announcement, and praised Mr Collins and the Minister for Police, Mr Pickering, for their stand on the issue.

The strategy had grown out of a street-watch report, he said, which was launched by the lobby in April last year.