

The story behind a story

“No Hard feelings Mate”: violence in the suburbs’.

The article “‘No hard feelings, mate’: violence in the suburbs”, published in *The Bulletin* on 5 December 1970, was written at a time when male homosexuality was illegal not only in New South Wales, but also across all Australia. So I was advised by Brian Hoad, the editor of the Red Page (the *Bulletin*’s literary gossip and opinions page), to not mention in my story that it was actually about a gay bashing and the police response to it, since this might possibly not engender much sympathy among the general *Bulletin* readership at that time. This was 1970, fourteen years before the law reform that decriminalized homosexuality in NSW, and poofsters were considered ‘fair game’, both by some parts of the public and also by the police.

And this was very obviously a gay hate crime, as it had taken place just outside a ‘Camp’ dance in the Petersham Dispensary Hall, a discreet venue for camp events, on Parramatta Road, in Petersham.

It was at a time when the Premier, Robin Askin, was pushing a ‘law and order’ campaign, to increase police powers to deal with all the demonstrations that had been taking place from the late 1960s. These demos were dismissed by the authorities as being the work of ‘long-haired radicals’ and troublemakers - and it was indeed a time when there were ongoing demonstration about so many things; the Vietnam war, anti-nuclear protests, censorship, and women’s rights. And here was an article spelling out that when an honest citizen, a teacher no less, was bashed, and went to the police, he was fobbed off. This was surely what ‘any law and order campaign’ ought to be about – dealing with an actual crime against a person, and police accountability, rather than worrying about street demonstrations on issues that many Australians were sympathetic about.

My article, initially published in the *Bulletin*, was then republished in the *Sunday Telegraph* the following Sunday, 9 December [I think it was because they were both owned by Sir Frank Packer]. And it was then that all hell broke loose, because the *Sunday Telegraph*, a paper for the masses, had a far wider readership than the *Bulletin*, a magazine with a far more limited readership. There was Askin trying to

argue that the police needed more powers to deal with 'public unrest', and here was an article that highlighted just how indifferent the police actually were to a very public assault. And this story was splashed on the front page of a very popular weekend newspaper.

Within a few days, the police contacted me. They wanted to take a statement from me. Luckily, at the time, Ken Buckley, who was President of the state's Council of Civil Liberties, was also a colleague at the university, his room just down the corridor from mine. And Ken suggested that he 'sit in' on the interview. So when the police arrived at my office, ready to take the statement, I told them that I wanted a witness to sit in with me. When they saw it was Ken Buckley, the police sergeant said 'Oh, so that's what it is going to be like'. I said 'yes, that's what it is going to be like'. The police had obviously had many run-ins with Ken over the years, because of his highlighting the failings of the police force – he was a real thorn in their side, often publicly shining a spotlight on police incompetence, indifference, and abuse of their powers.

Taking the statement was a slow process, as the constable typed up the questions and the answers. But it was worth having Ken there, since the sergeant stuck very close to simple questions about the attack, nothing about why I was where I was. I am sure that, otherwise, the police would have made some impugning mention of 'homosexuality' – implying that this is what homosexuals deserved. Police culture then – and still for many more years – considered that poofers were fair game. And as the recent *In Pursuit of Truth and Justice* Report indicates, often the police themselves were involved in these bashings.

My trepidation was confirmed about a month later, when the police rang me and said they wanted to show me some people, to see if I recognized any of them who might have been involved in the attack on me. And where did we go – to the 'camp' dance at the Petersham Dispensary Hall on a Saturday night. It was quite embarrassing, me being walked through the dance hall that was crowded with lesbians and camp men, accompanied by three uniformed police. I knew at once what it was about – retaliation against someone who blew the whistle, and letting me – and all the others there – know that the police knew all about us.

Needless to say, I didn't recognize any of my attackers there, and so the evening ended. But I was never invited back to any of the dances at the Petersham Dispensary Hall, ever again.

Postscript: the article was reprinted again, in *Forum: Contemporary Australian Essays* (Wiley and Sons, Sydney, 1972)].