



New South Wales

Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ hate crimes

Statement of Leslie Angus Peterkin

14 November 2022

This statement made by me accurately sets out the evidence that I would be prepared, if necessary, to give to the Special Commission of Inquiry into LGBTIQ Hate Crimes as a witness. The statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Background

1. My name is Leslie Angus Peterkin. I am 88 years old and currently live in Newcastle, NSW. I was born in 1934. I was born in Lismore and lived there for six years. I then moved to Armidale, and later moved to Coramba, where I lived grew up until I left home.
2. I am a retired former teacher and potter. I regularly play piano at four nursing homes in Newcastle.
3. In 1951, I moved to Sydney to train as a Physical Education (PE) teacher at Sydney Teachers College.
4. My first job was as a PE teacher at Mosman Intermediate High School in 1954. I was also the Sportsmaster and Officer of Cadets. I lived at home with my parents in Mosman while I held this position. My father was the Sergeant of Police at Chatswood Police Station.
5. I travelled overseas for two years from 1959 and upon returning in 1961 I was appointed Lecturer in Physical Education at the Australian School of Pacific Administration in Mosman, which position took me to Papua New Guinea on several occasions. I held this position until 1964. In 1965 I moved into primary school teaching.
6. At that time, National Service Training was compulsory. I had that training in 1953 and subsequently served in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) alongside my work as a teacher. I was promoted to Lieutenant in 1958 and remained in the CMF for some years.
7. Throughout this period, I was also a potter and ceramic artist. I began to learn pottery as a student at Mosman Evening College about 1955 and in 1961 I became the teacher, a position I held until 1969.
8. In 1963, I met my long-term partner, William, who had just returned from London where he had been a dancer with the London Festival Ballet. We moved in to a flat in Clifford Street, Mosman.
9. We had a long and interesting relationship which lasted for 40 years until his untimely death in 2004. William had several jobs in entertainment and also taught ballet at the Mosman Evening College.
10. In 1970 William and I decided to put our skills together. I gave up teaching, and we opened a Studio of Ballet, Arts, and Crafts, called The STUDIO 52A, in Spit Junction. It was a very successful venture until 1980 when the premises were destroyed in a fire.

11. I had to find another place to continue my pottery business. I found a delightful old bakery that was now empty in the village of Tyalgum in the Tweed Valley, which I bought. We left Sydney in 1980, and I set up a pottery workshop and gallery called Bakehouse Pottery and carried on a very successful career as a potter for the next 20 years until I retired in 1999 at 65 years of age.
12. Very soon after I moved into Tyalgum I also got a casual job at the local public school teaching Art, Craft and Music two days a week.

“Coming out”

13. When I moved to Sydney in 1951 to begin my training as a physical education teacher at Sydney Teachers College, I quickly found out, purely by accident, about some were places where men would meet for sex. These were public toilets and the newsreel cinemas, of which there were two at the time in George Street.
14. In a public toilet, you would usually stand at the urinal. If someone came and stood beside you, there were usual means of communicating such as to rub your crotch, and if the other person responded then you might move into a cubicle and continue with whatever sexual activity you might both choose. Sex was anonymous and names were rarely exchanged. An expression used for this was “Blow and GO.”
15. At the newsreel theatres, it was customary to sit in the second or third rows from the front. Someone would sit beside you, you might rub knees together, then hand fondling would follow, then there might be some signal to go to the theatre toilet, or to leave and meet somewhere else.
16. In 1961, I called in to a well-known “beat” at the Neutral Bay Wharf. (I discuss beats generally below.) There I met a man called Barry Day. We hit it off together and developed a very firm friendship, which lasted until his death about 4 years ago. It was Barry who introduced me to the “gay scene” in Sydney at the time.
17. He took me to the bars at the Chevron and the Rex Hotel, both in Kings Cross. One could freely mix with other gay men at these venues, and you would often be invited to parties where gay people of both sexes met for a good time. And on occasions you might meet someone with whom you could engage in sexual activity.
18. I began to feel more at ease and accepting of my sexuality, knowing that I was not alone in this way. I had many long-lasting friendships with fellows I met at such places back then.
19. I was an active member of the Mosman Musical Society from the beginning of 1960. There I met and formed a short relationship with another gay man. We moved in to a flat to live together and it was at this time that I decided to take the big step of “coming out”, as the expression goes, to my parents.
20. When I look back on that, I think it was an extraordinarily brave thing to do, but fortunately it didn’t turn out to be a foolish one as well. My mother was distraught by the idea, but my father, I suppose from his experience as a policeman, didn’t seem at all disturbed. His acceptance was a great relief.
21. That relationship didn’t last for more than a year, and not long after that, at the end of 1963, I met William. I ceased to frequent the beats after this for quite a long time. Acceptance of our relationship by family and friends came about reasonably quickly.

Using beats

22. Although I knew at a very early age that my sexual preferences were for men, it was drummed into me at a very young age that it was wrong – by my Christian religion, by my

- upbringing, by condemnation in the Bible, and so on. As a result, I suffered a lot of guilt for many years.
23. Homosexuals were usually described in those days in offensive terms such as nancy, queer, fags, dykes, fairies and poofters. The word "Gay" didn't really become the more acceptable word until after legalisation in 1984, although it was used before that. It sounded nicer than any of the others.
 24. I had advice about my homosexual preferences from a psychiatrist when I was about 23. He told me that it was normal for some males, so not to feel guilty about it, "but be careful". Those were his very words. This was a great relief. But homosexual activity and gay relationships were still illegal in this state right up till 1984 and one was always mindful of this.
 25. The sexual urge is a strong one and human beings have needs. So back in that era (the 50s and 60s) the only way one could find some sexual gratification was to seek out like minded men.
 26. I started "doing the beats", as the expression goes, probably about 1952 or 1953. I mainly went to the newsreel cinemas at first, and later other places such as North Sydney Oval and St Leonard's Park. I rarely went to the beats on the south side, but had heard of beats at Rushcutters Bay, the Darlinghurst Wall, Moore Park, Marks Park and Centennial Park.
 27. You learnt about beats often by exchange of information with other "Beat Goers." It was possible to meet someone anytime day or night, but doing beats at night-time seemed to be more popular.
 28. Going to a beat was always fraught with an element of danger, as you quickly learnt that you could be the victim of two risks: "Poofter Bashing", as it was called, or police entrapment which was a well-known hazard back then. I refer to both of these risks below.
 29. There were numerous examples of toilets other than in parks, where men congregate for sex or a "Pick-up" (meaning to meet another person, and then go elsewhere for sex.) Toilets at railway stations such as St James and Town Hall, and also Myers and David Jones City Department Stores were notorious in the 60s and 70s. "The Round House" toilet block in Tweed Heads was always quite busy.
 30. All of these beats were very well-known and well-used by gay men, at least from the 1950s in my experience. Many married and bi-sexual men also used the beats to have sex with other men.
 31. Cubicle walls in public toilets are often defaced with obscene drawings and comments as well as having "glory holes" drilled in the adjoining cubicle walls so that men can engage in sexual activity through the hole. This is understandably offensive to the general public. Because of this, many Councils have demolished the old toilet blocks and replaced them with toilets without a urinal, and access to the cubicle only from the street. That is obviously a deterrent to gay sexual activity.
 32. While I was living in the Tweed Valley, the main beats were at the toilets at Murwillumbah, and the Lions Lookout. And in Tweed Heads, Razorback Lookout was the place to go.
 33. In country towns, the public toilet in the local park is quite often a beat.
 34. My impression is that gay dating sites on the internet appear to have reduced the prevalence of using beats.
 35. Not all beats are public toilets. Homosexual activity also occurs, for example, at nude beaches, or in the surrounding bushland. One of those was Reef Beach near Manly. Reef Beach was the site of the notorious "citizen's arrest" of a nudist by the well-known former

footballer Rex Mossop in 1976. It was well known that Mossop described people who went to nude beaches as perverts, voyeurs, exhibitionists and sexual deviants

Police Entrapment

36. One night in 1956, coming home from somewhere in the city, I decide to look in at the North Sydney beat. This was a public toilet under the grandstand at North Sydney Oval.
37. I was standing at the urinal when a very good-looking fellow in a dark suit came in and stood beside me. There was a brief exchange of signals of the kind I have described above, and then he grabbed me by the scuff of the neck and said, "You're under arrest!"
38. He took me out to a waiting unmarked Holden Sedan, in which was sitting a Detective from North Sydney Police Station. I was roughly shoved into the back seat. I was accused of soliciting for sex in a public place and was questioned extensively about my name, personal details, and motives. I was to be taken back to North Sydney Police Station to be charged and imprisoned.
39. I was totally gripped with fear and worry about what this effect this charge would have on my career and standing in the community. I broke down and explained to the detective in charge that my father was Sergeant Peterkin at Chatswood Police Station.
40. The detective, whose name I cannot recall, to my great relief told me that he would let me off but said "Put five pounds in your hand and go to Kings Cross and fuck a woman!"
41. I do recall going back to North Sydney Police Station a few days later and having a further conversation with the detective. He reassured me that the matter would not go any further.
42. That was an extremely traumatic experience and as a result I ceased "doing the beats" until I came back from England at the end of 1960.

Attack at a beat

43. In the late 1970s, maybe around 1978, I stopped in at a public toilet in Kirribilli. On this occasion, I was just going there to urinate, but I knew that it was a well-known beat.
44. Immediately after I walked in and was standing at the urinal, I was attacked by a tall thin Caucasian man carrying a long thin carving knife. Thankfully, I managed to high-tail it out of there without him doing any damage.
45. I went straight to the police at North Sydney Police Station. Having a father as a policeman, I have always felt comfortable going to police. I was treated well by the police, who did not ask why I had been at the toilet. I know they drove down to the toilet block, but I don't know what else came of my report.
46. The moment you walked into a toilet, you were aware that you could become a victim of homophobic assaults. The risk of violence was always in the back of your mind if you went to a beat. Homophobic people knew that homosexual men would attend a public toilet and would lie in wait. You had to be careful and look out for yourself and be ready to leave quickly if something seemed wrong.

Acceptability of gay relationships

47. Despite homosexual conduct being criminalised until 1984, my own experience has been that, except for a couple of occasions which I will mention later, being in a relationship and living with another man was hardly ever a problem. We didn't go around telling everyone that we were a gay couple, but people do "put two and two together" and make the assumption that you must be gay.

48. My workplaces - schools and colleges - were aware of my relationship with William but it was never an issue. Bill, on the other hand, was working in the world of theatre and TV, where the acceptance of "gay" men was almost without question.
49. When we opened our business in Spit Junction in 1970, my impression was that we were totally accepted and respected as any ordinary business-people would be. When we moved to Tyalgum, a small country village, in 1980, there were a few occasions when homophobic slurs were aimed at us, but I was always quick to take care of this.

The AIDS Crisis

50. The AIDS epidemic was without a doubt a setback for gay acceptance. Homosexuals were blamed for the problem. Adverse publicity and television ads like "the Grim Reaper" didn't help.
51. One January afternoon in 1983, after the AIDS crisis raised its ugly head, my next-door neighbour and the local Tyalgum butcher, Bob Shackle, came back from the pub and said to me, "They're talking about you at the pub, Les." I replied, "Oh, what are they saying Bob?" He said, "They're saying you've got AIDS and they're going to stop you from teaching at the School. There is going to be a P&C meeting about this."
52. I replied in the most forceful way I could, "Go back to the pub and tell them that the first person who says anything publicly in a derogatory, defamatory, or threatening manner about me, will be sued for a minimum of half a million dollars. I have a very good lawyer in Sydney that will be happy to do this!"
53. I arranged with a good friend of mine who had a son at the school, to go to the P&C meeting and take notes. But nothing was said and the whole matter blew over.
54. On a couple of occasions, I had school children calling out in my hearing "Poofter", presumably a reflection of discussion within the home. I went straight to the parents and reported this behaviour to them. I insisted that they do something about teaching their children manners and respect, and told them that such behaviour is just not acceptable or tolerated. Parents were usually very surprised but co-operative and an apology would be offered. It always worked.
55. On another occasion I reported the matter to the principal. He was most cooperative and responded by "matting" the boys. Matting involved bringing the boys together and standing them on the "mat" in the presence of the headmaster and myself for a dressing down and severe reprimand.
56. Bill and I were well respected as members of the Tyalgum community for the 20 years that we spent there. We started a Theatre Group which raised thousands of dollars for community projects. I became the President of the Tyalgum Progress Association and received an Australia Day Medal for community service. On my retirement from teaching in 1999, the P&C started a children's art prize called the Les Peterkin Portrait Prize, which became an annual event for the next 23 years.

Newcastle

57. In August 2008, a few years after my partner died, I moved from Tyalgum to Newcastle.
58. There were and still are active beats in Newcastle, including Braye Park at Waratah and Blackbutt Reserve near Kotara. At Braye Park, men arrive in their cars, park, and sexual activity happens along nearly bush tracks.
59. On one occasion, in about 2014, I was at parked at Braye Park when my car was attacked in broad daylight. A blue sedan pulled up beside me and two young Islander looking men got

out. They circled my car eyeing me off in a menacing way, and the one of them smashed my back windscreen with his fist of all things!

60. It was a clear example of being perceived to be gay just because you happen to be in a place where it is perceived that gay men congregate.
61. By around 2018, as a result of all the crime against gay men, there was quite a lot of police activity. Squad cars would drive around and tell people to move on. The council also erected NO PARKING signs in parts of the area.
62. Any sexual activity in a public place, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is an offence, and therefore the police have every right to act if such activity is reported. However, they should conduct themselves in a professional way. From my observations, that is what they generally do in this day and age. Police attitudes have certainly changed for the better.

A Final Conclusion

63. A more tolerant and accepting attitude towards the gay world exists nowadays. Among other reasons for this, I think, are positive and accurate reporting, and less condemnation, in the media, and the more prominent public presence of gay people, well known gay celebrities and so on. The use of the respectful term "LGBTIQ" indicates this too.
64. This tolerance and acceptance has grown from, and is reflected in, things like: the decriminalisation of homosexual conduct in 1984; the advent and later acceptance of the Gay Mardi Gras; the opening of venues where gay people could meet and socialise; the gay saunas; drag shows such as "Les Girls"; the introduction on the internet of gay dating sites; Gay & Lesbian Police Liaison Officers; the legalisation of same sex marriage; sex education in some schools which educates young people about the variations in sexual preferences, and so on.
65. There will always be homophobia while religious intolerance exists. There will always be people who will not accept homosexuality because of a refusal to accept or understand that there are more sexual preferences than just heterosexual. But homophobia can never be condoned or tolerated, nor can homophobic violence in any form or perpetrated by any persons.

Signature:



Name: Leslie Angus Peterkin

Date:

14th November 2022