

National Queer Officers' Report to NUS National Executive

11/7/2009

Heidi Claus and Liam Byrne

1. Same-Sex Marriage Rights Campaign

The campaign for Same-Sex Marriage rights is gaining momentum in the lead-up to the August 1 National Day of Action. Almost every major city will be holding an event for the NDA, and NUS has been central in their organising.

We have produced NUS specific posters and leaflets for the rally in conjunction with CAPA, and NUS is advertised in most of the community material that has been produced. This is fantastic as it builds the profile of NUS within the community itself, as well as on campus.

Senator Hanson-Young from the Greens recently submitted a private members bill to Parliament to legislate for Same-Sex Marriage. Alongside this bill she submitted the 30,000 signatures that NUS collected last year calling for equal rights. It is fantastic in the lead up to the NDA that a great swathe of the community press and sections of the mainstream media have covered this event, creating publicity for both the rally and for NUS.

In Melbourne we have had several successful events as part of the campaign. We have hosted a very successful trivia night to act as a fundraiser for the campaign, and also a Campaign Launch that was held on Thursday June 25th. The campaign launch came one week after the launch of the latest Galaxy Poll on Marriage rights, which found that 60% of the broader population (and 74% of younger people) support marriage rights. This was a fantastic result which reinforces the popular support for equal rights, and just how out of touch the Rudd government is. Bronwyn Pike, the Victorian State Education Minister spoke at the Campaign Launch, which was great in terms of garnering community press interest, and also to add to the visibility of the campaign.

The Equal Love campaign has also produced a fantastic Youtube video to help promote the NDA and to raise the campaigns visibility. It is a satirical take on the Mac/PC ads that highlights well why nothing short of full marriage rights will ever be true legal equality. It is accessible at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agGCyyD6D60>.

Liam visited Brisbane to attend the Pride March there. This was a fantastic opportunity to meet the Queer officers there, and also to promote the National Day of Action, which will hopefully better previous years attendance in that state this year.

We have also used community media outlets to build the profile of the campaign and NUS. We have achieved this through regular press statements which put forward the students perspective on Queer issues. Joy 94.9 have also been particularly supportive, giving us an opportunity in Melbourne to speak about NUS, homophobia on campus, and the NDA.

2. Supporting on Campus Activism at Toowoomba.

The National Queer office is proud to be supporting and involved in the campaign by the queer Alliance groups at the University of Southern Queensland. Alliance was banned from the Universities 'Harmony' day, which was an utter homophobic disgrace. Alliance have also been active in demanding that the new student complex will include a queer space.

It is vital to support these on-campus campaigns. Any further marketisation of our universities is likely to see further attempts to exclude oppressed groups from the public eye.

Attacks on queer spaces and queer departments are likely to be part of this. This is extenuated by the refusal of the Rudd Labor Government to repeal political-VSU.

It is also fantastic to have an opportunity to prove the relevance of NUS to on-campus activists, and our support has been received very well. It was fantastic that the activists from Toowoomba also came along to the Queensland Pride march held in Brisbane on Saturday June 13.

3. Campus Contact

We have continued to be in constant contact with campus Queer Officers through both face-to-face visits and other means of communication. Events we have already been part of, such as the community pride marches, have been fantastic way to get campus activists together and to build networks with the broader community at these events.

Queer Collaborations in Canberra will be a fantastic opportunity to continue this, and will give queer activists to discuss and theorise our oppression. It will also be great to feed in all the activism that has been going on, and prepare for a final push to build the August 1 NDA.

4. Concession Cards

The National Queer Office has engaged in the campaign for International and Postgraduate concession cards. It is important for NUS to have a presence in this campaign, which aims at protesting one of the most visible symbols of discrimination, particularly against international students. The racism that international students suffer often means that Queer international students feel unable to engage with Queer life while in Australia. Oppression makes it much more difficult to feel confident in your self, and to celebrate your sexuality.

5. Opposing the Racist Attacks on Indian Students

The National Queer office has also participated in the demonstrations called to protests the appalling and racist attacks upon Indian students. It is the duty of NUS to oppose racism and to oppose the discriminatory conditions which international students suffer, racism such as this from the Brumby and Rudd governments only legitimised the racism of the attackers.

While it is good to see many people from the NUS National office involving themselves in the issue, the National Queer Office is worried by reference by some National Office Bearers to Indian and other international students as being an 'industry'. NUS should oppose both the racist attacks upon Indian and other international students, and the disgusting exploitation which they suffer from the university system. Our support for them must come from solidarity and support for our fellow students, not from the fear of having an 'industry' damaged.

6. “Queer Welfare Recipients Kept in the Dark” Article in *MCV*, 01 April 2009, by Rachel Cook

Concern that information regarding changes to Centrelink payments will not reach all same-sex couples on benefits has prompted welfare lobbyists to make a formal complaint.

The Welfare Rights Centre sent a letter to Centrelink chief executive Finn Pratt asking that Centrelink notify all single recipients of a Social Security or Family Assistance payment of the proposed changes to ensure gay and lesbian people are informed.

Since Monday, radio commercials, newspaper and magazine advertisements have run as part of a campaign to advise same-sex couples on welfare that they must inform Centrelink of their relationship status.

However, the Welfare Rights Centre says this is not adequate enough to reach all same-sex couples.

“While the ads are good, they are not legal notice and not everyone will see them,” Maree O’Halloran, director of the Welfare Rights Centre in Sydney, told *MCV*.

“A lot of people in the gay and lesbian community will see the ads, but there will be older women and men who don’t have access to that information.

“There are people who may have lived on the old age pension for 15 years or more and Centrelink cannot expect that an ad is notification enough for these people.”

O’Halloran said a letter to all people receiving benefits would be the logical way to deliver written notice to all gays and lesbians on welfare.

“Centrelink is arguing that they don’t know who is gay or lesbian, so we say send a letter to all single beneficiaries and tell them there has been a legal change and it may affect them.

“To me, there are only two reasons why they wouldn’t do this: one is cost, and the other is that they don’t want to disturb people who aren’t gay and lesbian.

“Our concern is that people may find they have accumulated debt without even knowing.”

Centrelink General Manager Hank Jongen told *MCV* his organisation does not have information about recipients who are in a same-sex relationship.

“Therefore [we] are unable to target a mailout specifically about the changes to customers who may be affected,” Jongen said.

“This is one of the reasons why Centrelink has launched an extensive information campaign on 30 March, targeting mainstream newspapers, specialist gay and lesbian, Indigenous and multicultural media, online news sites and other publications.

“From 1 July, 2009, when the reforms take effect, letters issued to customers through the course of ongoing business, and to new customers, will advise customers of their notification obligations, including advising of their relationship status – whether same-sex or opposite-sex.”

On Monday, 11 customers contacted Centrelink to declare they were in a same-sex relationship.

However, activists are outraged by what they see as a discrepancy in gay and lesbian rights.

The National Union of Students Female Queer Officer Heidi Claus said in a media release: “The Government will recognise our relationships when it means they will save money, but will not grant equal relationship rights.

“This is not good enough. We demand same-sex marriage rights now.”

Same-sex couples receiving welfare payments have until July 1 to declare their relationships.

7. Article in Queensland Pride

Gay group banned from USQ Harmony Day

Written by Peter Hackney

Monday, 25 May 2009 13:15



A gay and lesbian group at a Queensland university is taking legal action after it was banned from having a stall at this year's Harmony Day.

The Alliance LGBT group at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Toowoomba is preparing a submission to the Anti-Discrimination Commission Queensland (ADCQ) after it was denied a stall at USQ's Harmony Day celebrations on Wednesday, March 18.

Harmony Day, an initiative of the Federal Government, aims to promote "respect, fairness, inclusion and a sense of belonging

for everyone", according to its website.

Alliance President Donna Markwell said the group applied for a stall a week before the event and that USQ Harmony Day Coordinator William Conwell was initially enthusiastic.

"But he rang back the next day and said we couldn't attend," she said.

"He wouldn't explain why and wouldn't negotiate with us at all."

The group was subsequently granted a stall within the university's refectory when the USQ Student Guild gave them a space against the wishes of the university.

"The end result was that we were in the refectory, separate from all the other groups who had their stalls in the quadrangle.

"We were made to feel excluded, inferior and separate."

Markwell said Alliance was taking the issue to the ADCQ after the university failed to respond to their official complaint lodged in March.

Conwell refused to comment, telling *Queensland Pride* he was "not allowed" to speak about the matter.

A university spokesperson told *Queensland Pride*: "A working party has been established to review the operation of Harmony Day and guidelines for participation are being drawn up to ensure no misunderstandings occur in the future."

A spokesperson for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, which oversees Harmony Day, said the department was investigating the matter.

National Union of Students (NUS) Queer Officer Heidi Claus said: "The banning of the LGBT Alliance group from the Harmony Day at USQ makes a mockery of the point of Harmony Day."

The NUS would be supporting any action taken by Alliance against the university, she said.

8. Statement to the Adelaide Advertiser in Response to Homophobic Letters

The Labor Governments refusal to legislate for equal rights is giving encouragement to bigotry and homophobia. Both Federally, and on a state basis in South Australia, the maintenance of the ban on same-sex marriage is a lightening rod for all forms of homophobic abuse and bigotry.

In response to an opinion piece supporting equal opportunity legislation in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, a whole flurry of letters to the editor have explicitly argued against equal rights for the LGBTI community, including inequality in relationship rights.

The Rudd government is committed to maintaining the ban on Same-Sex marriage, and thus maintaining legal inequality for same-sex couples in Australia. The Rann government won't even commit to ensuring that the piece-meal reforms that Rudd has offered on a Federal level will apply in South Australia, which would require state-based legislation.

The maintenance of such inequality is a statement from the Labor Party that they do not see LGBTI people as equal citizens, and they do not see our relationships as being equal to straight ones. This discrimination from the top of society only helps fuel it below.

Everyone who is appalled at this homophobia and this denial of equal rights will have a chance to be heard on August 1, as part of the National Day of Action for same-sex marriage rights. August marks the fifth year anniversary of the ban, and everyone who supports equal rights will have a chance to show our politicians, and the bigots out there, that 57% of people in Australia support equal rights for LGBTI people, and we will not tolerate homophobia and discrimination.

Liam Byrne
National Queer Officer, National Union of Students.

9. National Queer Office Press Release in Response to Galaxy Poll

*****MEDIA RELEASE*****

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

LABOR OUT OF TOUCH ON SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

The National Union of Students Queer Department welcomes the findings of the most recent galaxy poll which reveals that 60% of people support equal marriage rights for same-sex couples.

National Queer Officer Heidi Claus said: 'This poll demonstrates the great amount of support that exists for same-sex marriage rights. The Rudd government has been using the excuse that there is not enough support for same-sex marriage, and told us we would have to be content with second-class relationship status. This poll shows how out of touch the Rudd Labor Government is.'

'This is the Fifth year of the ban on same-sex marriage. It is time for Rudd and Labor to stop prevaricating and institute the equal rights that can only be achieved with equal marriage rights for same-sex couples.'

NUS Queer Officer Liam Byrne commented: 'It is clear now that the overwhelming majority of people support equal rights, including 74% of younger people. Rudd has to decide who he represents, the vast majority who support equal rights or the bigoted homophobes.'

The 'Equal Love' campaign is holding a national day of action for same-sex marriage rights on August 1 in most major cities.