

Movement in a straight line

The men's movement is a painful place for gay men, says academic Gary Dowsett. He doesn't want to hear about the problem of who does the washing up anymore, as he told Michael Flood.

GARY Dowsett is one of a dozen or so writers in Australia who I would place at the cutting edge of masculinity theory. I first met Gary at Australia's first academic conference on men and masculinity, held in Sydney back in 1991. Since then I've seen his name pop up in a host of publications to do with masculinity and sexuality,* often in collaboration with Bob Connell, a central figure in masculinity studies.

Gary Dowsett and I had already chatted about questions of sexual politics and sexual identity. (See "You show me yours", XY, Autumn 1994.) I then asked him what he thought of current trends in the men's movement.

"I'm very troubled about the increasing divide between gay and straight men in masculinity work. I know there are gay men involved in the men's movement and I know there are men in the men's movement who are not gay who seriously take on gay issues, but they're not the men I'm talking about.

"I think that the divide is increasing because, for many gay men, the politics of their relations with other men are much more satisfactorily being worked out with other gay men. I haven't fucked every gay man that I know in the world, right? But I live with them daily, in households, in work relationships, in politics, in forms of community involvement. So my relations with other gay men, while they might have this common link of a shared sexual identity and an assumed practice, are actually about the negotiation of daily relations between men.

"I find increasingly that my daily relations with gay men, with whom I work and live and share my social life, are much, much more comfortable; a whole set of issues have already been addressed. I still hear a lot of anti-male stuff coming from young

gay men, who've come to an awareness of what the situation is for women, and one of the first things they do is leap to an anti-male position as a way of dealing with it. And you recognise where some of that is coming from and understand what sort of political process those men are involved in. But on the whole, after twenty years of sexual politics, there are certain things I don't want to revisit every week, you know. They become an irrelevance to this life that I've now built for myself, with largely gay men in it. That's not to say I don't want to engage the politics and keep aware of the issues and keep supporting those political movements. I still intend to do all of that, but I will now claim and demand space as a gay men for the gay community in which I live and the relations writ large I have made with other gay men.

"If heterosexual men and women are still arguing over the issue of childcare, that is a very serious issue, and I will lend all the

support I can to the resolution of that issue, politically and theoretically. I don't deal with it in my daily life at all, any more, and nor can anyone say that I should."

I ask Dowsett what he means, and his response is emphatic. "Well, I don't have children. I don't live with children, I don't want children, I don't want to look after children, I don't want to parent other people's children. I have a perfectly happy domestic life of my own, organised around a gay relationship. To be told that I ought to go and do the childcare: I'd just walk out the door if someone said that to me now. I mean, it is not *my* issue, and I don't see why it should be in my personal life. My political position on support, the role of the state, law reform, any of those things, that's where as a public person I engage. But my social relations and the life that I've organised as a man with other men around me are mine to decide on. People can configure that any way they wish: they can

configure it as opting out or misogyny or all sorts of other things if they want to. But I think gay men are increasingly saying this. And this is in a time of coalitionist politics where we are working much more closely with lesbians that we have done before, so it's not an issue about women versus men at all.

"We too have had to deal with the problem of who does the washing up. In fact, I've solved the thing, a long time ago. So I can't bear hearing about this stuff any more, and I see men my age still struggling with their women partners about housework: I just want to go out the door. I say, 'For god's sake, for 20 years you've been fighting about housework, I can't believe you have not found a way around this problem.' Now, they can throw up all sorts of arguments about the structure of



There is always a part of gay men that they have to leave behind, no matter how accepting everybody is, when they go to a men's event, says Gary Dowsett.

Photo: Michael Flood

heterosexual relations and structural inequality, blah blah, all that kind of stuff, but we've had exactly the same problem. I've lived in two-career families, I've lived in houses with lesbians where we had the same issues to deal with at times: we've found ways around it.

"I suppose what I'm trying to say is that I think there's a whole series of things that gay men have now worked out, and that in *those* spaces I no longer want to have to deal with the other places where they have not been worked out. And I don't think that's an unfair position. It's not a question of political commitments; it's a question of recognising that vast changes have happened in the last 20 years in the way in which gay men, and I think lesbians, have handled these same kinds of questions about gender, about sexual relations, about close emotional

ties, relations to family, parenting, all those sorts of questions. As a result, a lot of gay men, and to a certain extent a lot of lesbians, say,

'Okay, we've solved our problems our way, it's all yours over there if you still have to deal with it.'

"I don't think that differences between gay and straight are recognised, and I think it is one of the reasons why gay men don't find anything in the men's movement at times. There's not a lot going on there with which to deal with gay relations every day. But also, it doesn't provide me with any handles any more about how I deal with the non-gay people in my life.

"I know some gay men do find value in the men's movement, so I know that the men's movement is not heterosexual. I'm not disputing that it's useful to some, I'm just giving you a personal position on this. I think it's very interesting that the men's movement has never attracted that level of gay support."

Does Gary Dowsett see any potential for that?

"No. Oh, and I'll give you the hard one now. I think the real issue is still to do with homophobia. I think it is to do, not with individual men's homophobia, but the institutionalised character of homophobia and heterosexism. Let's take Eve Sedgwick, and her notion of homosociality and homophobia in the structuring of all relations between people. Homophobia and the way it is in all of us, not just in straight people, is a very large structural and historical issue that has to be dealt with in some way. I

think that's part of the problem. I think the issue of physicality between men is a real divide between gay and straight men, and I have, as you know, had plenty of experience in my life of unnecessary and unwanted hugs from men. This is non-gay men's endless attempt to deal with their own troubles around gay men, which rarely takes into account the mixed messages it gives gay men. And there have been endless attempts by straight men to have sex with gay men, in the hope that this will actually deal with the issue too. And it doesn't: it just does more damage to the gay men and creates more confusion.

"Equally, on the side of gay men, I think one of the reasons why a lot of gay men say 'Okay, gay community is the resolution' is that, god, at least you know that you can take for granted that sexual attraction

between people is understood and that you know what the rules are. That's always going to be a real dilemma for gay men in the

men's movement; their interest in other men who are not gay is always going to be a really big problem and is going to make the men's movement a really painful place for gay men. Because it will be gay men who are actually being asked to deny their sexuality in the men's movement, not heterosexual men, right? The gay men are the ones that have to say 'no' to themselves. It remains in a sense an oppressive place; it has to, almost by definition. It means that there is always a part of gay men that they have to leave behind, no matter how accepting everybody is, when they go to a men's event (even if they take their boyfriend!).

"So I don't know what the answer is in masculinist politics; there are no solutions, only ongoing struggles. You know, we take the new tools that are coming up and we attempt to re-work them again and we give it another a shot and see what happens. Unlike many gay men I still keep an interest in what's happening in masculinity politics, because I think there's some interesting things going on. But I've never been to a men's festival and I doubt that I ever will." ●

* One of Gary Dowsett's most recent articles is "I'll show you mine, if you'll show me yours: Gay men, masculinity research, men's studies, and sex", published in the special issue on masculinity of the journal *Theory and Society*, 22(5), 1993.

Sydney Men's Festival



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January 1995**

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