“You can bonk but you can’t breed”: Australian political and social attitudes to queer family.

by

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Abstract

This analysis of media reports concerning two Australian politicians, former Federal MP Warren Entsch and NSW Legislative Council member, the Rev. Fred Nile, illustrates the contradictory discourses at work within public opinion on homosexuals and their families. A liberal discourse exemplified by Entsch about preserving individual rights and maximising freedom of choice indicates more positive attitudes to homosexuality, but a Conservative discourse championed by Nile aimed at preserving “family values” and “protecting” the social institutions of marriage and family, indicates negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian people being allowed to marry and raise children. A lack of recent, credible social research into Australian public opinion on these matters means that governments are shaping their policies based on perceptions which may not, in fact, be accurate. The media prominence given to hostile views, and the vociferous attacks on supportive legislators and journalists mean that conservative views appear to be prevailing in the debate. This has resulted in a somewhat paradoxical situation where conservatives, traditionally anti-sex, pro-marriage and pro-natalist, appear to be advocating non-reproductive sex outside of marriage for one segment of the Australian population. It seems that queer Australians may bonk, but they may not breed.

Keywords: gay and lesbian families; public opinion; gay marriage; gay rights; social institutions.

Introduction
In their 2005 Web paper, ‘Mapping Homophobia in Australia’, Flood and Hamilton (2005:1) define homophobia as the belief that homosexuality is immoral. Finding that 35% of the population aged 14 years and above subscribe to this belief, they see homophobia as widespread in Australia, and implicated in the range of formal and informal discriminations faced by lesbians and gay men. Psychological work on public opinion shows it results from a complex interplay between a number of factors, including group and personal interests, core values, the mass media, personality, and identification with political leaders (Skitka and Mullen 2002). Political parties in Australia are particularly sensitive to public opinion when it comes to legislation regarding homosexuals and their families, as will be seen in Penny Wong’s comments referred to later in this article. So it is important to look at how public opinion is influenced, perceived, and measured, because of its direct relevance to the political and social rights of queer families. In this paper I will use media reports of two political figures, Warren Entsch and the Rev. Fred Nile, to examine the interplay between their public pronouncements, their perceptions about public opinion, and what we actually know about public opinion, on the subject of lesbian and gay families. I argue that in the absence of credible research on Australian social attitudes to the formation and status of such families, the most vociferous, hostile rhetoric, based on ideology rather than evidence, is dominating the public debate.

The Janus face of queer issues: Homosexuals as individuals and homosexuals as families.

How does public opinion form? Psychological determinants include things like self-interest, group interests involving in-group and out-group dynamics, and values.
arise from being immersed in a given political culture, which can be broadly defined as the net of shared beliefs, values and norms about the relationship between individual citizens, and between citizens and their political institutions. This culture is so pervasive that it goes relatively unnoticed in everyday life, whilst being continually reinforced in any given sociopolitical context by processes of socialisation, by the mass media, and by identification with political leaders (Skitka and Mullen 2002: 116,126). Flood and Hamilton (2005) found different categories of people more likely to be homophobic, by features such as gender, age, education, whether living in a rural or urban setting, and particularly some forms of religious adherence. Their paper was based on Roy Morgan research involving 24,718 respondents during 2003/2004. There were actually two attitudinal questions, but their analysis only focuses on the first which was, “I believe that homosexuality is immoral”. The other statement was, “Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children”. Of those who believed homosexuality to be immoral, only 7% thought it was acceptable for homosexual couples to adopt; of those who thought it not immoral, 56% believed adoption should be permitted (2005: 5).

This highlights two distinct areas of social attitudes towards homosexuality in Australia; firstly, the practice of homosexual relations between consenting adults in private, and secondly, the issue of homosexual people forming families, especially ones that involve children. These areas illustrate two core, and often competing sets of values underpinning Australian social and political attitudes: liberalism and conservatism. Liberalism is the belief that the aim of politics is to preserve individual rights and to maximise freedom of choice, based on drawing a line between the public and the private (Reeves 1996: 286). This underpins the discourse of liberal tolerance and equality, and
thus focuses on the civil rights of individual homosexual people as citizens. Conservatism is a political philosophy which aspires to the preservation of what is thought to be the best in established society, and opposes radical change. Preserving existing hierarchies and traditions is thought to protect social order (Allison 1996: 104; McLean 1996: 501). In this case it manifests in the attempt to preserve ‘family values’ and ‘protect’ the social institutions of marriage and family by the exclusion of non-heterosexual people. The tensions between liberalism and conservatism lie at the heart of both major political parties in Australia, and indeed the Australian electorate as a whole, and are particularly manifest in debates about homosexuality and queer families. Former Liberal MP, Warren Entsch, can be seen to exemplify the former; the Rev. Fred Nile is a champion of the latter.

A ‘liberal’ Liberal and a conservative.

When the Howard government introduced amendments to the Marriage Act in May 2004 to define marriage as the union of a man and a woman entered into for life, the Labor opposition agreed to support the amendments. They were opposed by what one article called the handful of "small l" liberals left in the parliamentary Liberal Party, Petro Georgiou, Peter King and Judi Moylan (Charlton 2004). However, the opposition that garnered most media attention came from Warren Entsch, Liberal MP for the north Queensland seat of Leichhardt and Parliamentary Secretary for Science and Industry. Under headlines like, ‘Redneck with a pink agenda’, and ‘Real man supports gay rights’, media reports described him as politically conservative and “fiercely” heterosexual, a former crocodile trapper, bull-catcher, RAAF serviceman and farmer, a Harley-rider and
'a big bruiser of a man with a Ron Barassi style moustache who wears the loudest ties in the Parliament and calls a spade a bloody shovel' (Dick 2006; Michael 2006; Milne 2006a, 2006b; Roberts 2004; Tom 2006). These attributes presumably put his heterosexual masculinity beyond question, thereby ensuring his impartiality in having no personal stake in the outcome.

Focusing on issues of equity and fairness rather than sexuality, Entsch spoke about his gay friends who had been together for 25 years saying, "I just find it offensive that the relationship that those people have should be deemed anything other than totally legitimate", describing the proposed amendments as “offensive” and “unnecessary” (Roberts 2004). He abstained from voting on the legislation, and said he considered crossing the floor. When the Prime Minister announced that he would move to override new laws passed by the ACTU government allowing same-sex civil unions in 2006, Entsch responded with a private members Bill seeking to legitimise the rights of gay and interdependent long-term couples to each other's entitlements such as superannuation and pensions (Milne 2006b). In 2007 he used the report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on the rights of same-sex couples to continue his lobbying, and presented a petition signed by 25,000 people calling for an end to discrimination against same sex couples to the Prime Minister (The Cairns Post 2007; AAP Bulletins 2007).

Yet despite his outspoken, very public and persistent advocacy for equal rights which has seen him in open defiance of his Prime Minister and which cost him Family First preferences at the 2004 election, Entsch has modified his message over the years in order to hew more closely to the party line (Zlotkowski 2004). He has done this by making the crucial distinction between the relationships of same-sex couples as a form of financial
and emotional *interdependency* rather than a form of *family* (Tom 2006). In 2004 he urged Mr Howard to abandon legislation to outlaw gay marriage, calling it offensive and unnecessary, and declared himself ‘disappointed and puzzled’ by the reaction of Family First (Roberts 2004; Zlotkowski 2004). Family First’s Ric Lippmann assured him it was not personal; he said gay couples did not fit the party’s description of what a *family* is, adding, “It’s not about judging or condemning the gay community – what they choose to do in their own homes is up to them” (Zlotkowski 2004). Here Lippmann replicates the bifurcated discourse about civil rights of individual homosexuals complemented by a conservative defence of the ‘family’ from non-heterosexual encroachment. Entsch clearly took the lesson to heart – by 2006 he was promoting civil unions rather than marriage for gay couples, following the UK model. “I’m comfortable with what’s happened in the UK and I’m supportive of it happening here. We’re not talking about marriage, but civil unions. We’re not talking about walking down the aisle” (Passmore 2006). By 2007, when even Mr Howard reportedly favoured granting same-sex couples the same legal and financial rights as heterosexual de-facto couples, Entsch was still being inundated with angry mail from evangelical Christians; he said he “feared” people were confusing his push for equal legal and financial rights with gay marriage (Coorey 2007). Tom (2006) describes the obscene, vituperative and often religiously-motivated hate mail received by Entsch, Tom herself, and other journalists who support gay rights. Clearly it has had an impact on Entsch’s position.

Indeed, when Queensland National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce alleged that allowing civil unions would lead to pressure for gay men and women to adopt children, Entsch responded, “Adoption is a totally separate issue and I would probably have a totally
different view on that. Biologically it’s not possible to have kids if you are of the same
gender and that needs to be accepted. There are more than enough childless heterosexual
couples desperate for families and not enough kids to go around . . . ” (Passmore 2006).
He was anxious to point out that the ‘fair go’ he was proposing related only to financial
and work-related entitlements, not to marriage and parenting rights. Although he had
once said he saw the relationships of gay couples as “totally legitimate” (Roberts 2004),
by 2006 he made clear that, in his view, they were not legitimate when it comes to caring
for children. Interestingly, it seemed that no-one in these debates was willing to
acknowledge the large numbers of lesbian and gay families that are already parenting
children, except the former chief justice of the Family Court, Alastair Nicholson (Ong
2006). Calling the refusal to legally recognise same-sex unions and children of
homosexual couples “an act of cruelty”, Justice Nicholson lamented the impact of
ideological, and particularly religious, values on the law, rather than actual evidence from
credible social research.

One of the fiercest ideologues publicly condemning homosexual people and their
families has been the Rev. Fred Nile. The son of a Kings Cross waitress and a taxi
driver, in 1964 he was ordained as a minister of the Congregational Church, which was
later absorbed into the Uniting Church. In 1974, he became NSW director of the
‘Festival of Light’, a conservative group, “For Christian values and the family -
permanence of marriage, primacy of parenthood, sanctity of life and limited government”
(Festival of Light 2008). This led to an increasing role in politics, resulting in his 1981
election to the NSW Parliament, and his founding of the ‘Call to Australia’ party in 1988
which became the ‘Christian Democratic Party’ in 1997. Elected to the New South
Wales Legislative Council four times, Nile resigned as a minister of the Uniting Church in 2003 over the ordination of practising homosexuals (Christian Democratic Party 2008).

Described as a "morals campaigner", Nile has been a strident critic of homosexuals and their families throughout his long career, enjoying sustained media attention (Simpson 2005). He campaigned to prevent the decriminalization of homosexual behaviour, “not because I wanted to see people jailed for what they did in private, but because the law acted as a restraint on explicit promotion of homosexuality” (McCarthy 2006). He denounces the appearance of homosexuals on television as subjecting children to homosexual propaganda, and wanted *Brokeback Mountain* banned because it would “push” teenage boys into homosexuality (Hawthorne and Blenkin 1999; McCarthy 2006). “They’re trying to get a traditional society to endorse their lifestyle and I don’t believe the majority of Australian people do endorse it” (McCarthy 2006). He has organised “prayer protests” against the Sydney Mardi Gras for more than 20 years, calling it a “sin spectacular” and praying – without effect – for it to be rained out (Simpson 2005; Nason 1998; Marr 2008). Sunday Telegraph columnist Paul Pottinger describes Nile’s ‘Family World News’ as a “fire-and-brimstone rag . . . devoted to inciting fear and loathing of gay people. It’s a hate sheet, pure and simple” (Pottinger 2003).

However, as Marr (2008) points out, Nile has had little positive legislative impact; he has never been able to parlay his tactical advantage of frequently holding the balance of power in the Legislative Council into achieving his stated aims, of ending Mardi Gras, for example, or isolating AIDS sufferers in jail. Nile himself admits that morals protests are on the decline, that churches appear unconcerned, and that the Australian public has mellowed (Simpson 2005). As his vote fell from roughly 10% of the electorate in 1981
to 3.2% in 1999, he has changed his tack. Focusing on the perils of Islam instead of homosexuality, he has called for the chador to be banned to guard against hidden bombs, and for an immediate moratorium on Islamic immigration. He acknowledged that this new direction was a factor in his increased vote, to 4.4% in 2004 (Marr 2008). His pragmatic accommodation to the prevailing mood of the electorate suggests that public opinion towards queer issues may, indeed, have changed.

“A view that is supported . . . by the vast majority of Australians”?

On the ABC’s popular television program “Q&A” on July 31st 2008, the following question was posed to the panel, which included Penny Wong, Minister for Climate Change and Water, and Shadow Treasurer, Malcolm Turnbull, by Ben from Adelaide:

“Malcolm, you’re one of the more socially progressive members of your party and you have a large gay representation in your electorate, and Penny you are actually gay. So I was wondering if either of you really support your party's stand on gay marriage? And don't start telling us about the discrimination you've removed, just tell us why you support a ban when most Australians don’t” (Q&A 2008).

Penny Wong carefully avoided giving her own opinion on the issue, reiterating her party's position that marriage is a "heterosexual institution". At one point she said, "That is a view that is supported, let's be frank, by the vast majority of Australians". Later, she claimed that the Labor Party's position is “where most of the community is at”, saying "most Australians still see marriage in the way I've described and the Labor Party respects that". While the panel robustly debated the merits of gay marriage, no one highlighted the competing claims, first by Ben from Adelaide that most Australians don't support a ban on gay marriage, and secondly by Penny Wong that the ‘vast majority of Australians’ do.
I would assert that we actually don’t know what the vast majority of Australians believe on the subject, because they have not been asked in a systematic and credible fashion. I can find no large-scale, reputable, Australian study conducted within the last ten years of attitudes towards gay marriage, issues of access to Assisted Reproductive Technologies, adoption, or fostering by lesbians and gay men, or legitimating the status of non-biological gay or lesbian parents. What studies there are employ small and unrepresentative samples (e.g. Camilleri and Ryan 2006; cf Polimeni, Hardie and Buzwell 2000) or do not canvass attitudes towards the formation and status of queer families (e.g. Kelley 2001; cf. Rissel et al. 2003; Wilson 2004). Camilleri and Ryan investigated attitudes to homosexual parenting as an alternative family unit, but only among 60 final year social work students at a Victorian university (2006: 296). Although based on a large random sample of Australians, Kelley’s (2001: 16) work focuses solely on the question of whether sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are wrong (48% said ‘always wrong’ in 1999/2000 compared to 64% in the middle 1980s). The AuSSA 2003\(^3\) question on which Wilson’s analysis is based asked,

> “Thinking about relationships and children today, please tell us how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: The law should recognise same-sex relationships” (Wilson 2004: 17-18).

This wording does not make clear what kind of legal recognition, and what the involvement of children would be. 35% of the 4,270 respondents agreed, 40% disagreed, and 25% selected ‘neither’ (Wilson 2004: 18).

Flood and Hamilton (2005) chose to focus on the 35% of their 24,718 respondents who believed that homosexuality is immoral. However, this means that two thirds of the sample rejected that view, and over half of that two thirds agreed that homosexual
couples should be allowed to adopt children (Flood & Hamilton 2005: 5). Morse, McLaren and McLachlan’s (2007) excellent study of heterosexuals’ attitudes toward same-sex parents, with a moderately sized convenience sample of 1217 volunteers, did not explore homosexuals’ right to become parents or what their parenting rights should be. What they did find was that Australian heterosexuals are not supportive of gay men and, in particular, lesbians as parents, and believe that children raised by same-sex parents would have substantial problems (Morse et al. 2007: 448). They observe that, “Even though a positive attitudinal shift has become apparent in ... Australia towards gay men and lesbians generally, it appears that the affirmative shifting attitudes may not have embraced families headed by gay males or lesbians” (Morse et al. 2007: 441).

Opinion polling shows varying results. A 2004 Newspoll of 1200 adults found 44% opposed to gay marriage, 38% in favour, with 18% undecided. A Galaxy poll which surveyed 1100 people in June 2007 found only 37% opposed and 57% in favour (Schubert 2007). *The Age* ran a readers’ poll in May 2008; 79% of the 2085 respondents agreed that gay couples should be allowed to marry. Anyone who saw the flurry of emails around LGBT email lists would know that this probably was not a representative sample! Exit polling of voters at the 2007 federal election conducted for the Australian Election Study (AES) found 43.5% in favour, 43.1% opposed, and 13.4% undecided on the legal recognition of same-sex marriages (Megalogenis 2008).

Such a variety of results illustrates the underlying tension in Australian public opinion, between a ‘liberal’ view of equal rights and non-discrimination - hence the widespread support for amending legislation about economic and legal rights - and a ‘conservative’ view about family, and especially parenting. The gay marriage issue sits right on the
cusp of these two value systems, and it could be that Australians are quite evenly divided. However, until we have comprehensive and reliable studies of Australian public opinion on homosexual families, policy makers like Penny Wong run the risk of seeing the most vociferous critics as representative of the ‘vast majority of Australians’.

**Conclusion**

In this analysis of media reports concerning two Australian politicians, former Federal MP Warren Entsch and NSW Legislative Council member, the Rev. Fred Nile, I have illustrated the contradictory values within Australian politics and also within the wider Australian society towards homosexuals and their families. A liberal discourse, exemplified by Warren Entsch, about preserving individual rights and maximising freedom of choice has resulted in a more positive attitude to homosexuality, and a willingness to address legislative inequalities in legal and financial matters. However a conservative discourse, championed by Fred Nile, aimed at preserving “family values” and “protecting” the social institutions of marriage and family, has manifested in negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian people being allowed to marry and raise children. A lack of recent, credible social research into Australian public opinion on these matters means that governments are shaping their policies based on their perceptions of public opinion which may not, in fact, be accurate. The media prominence given to hostile views, and the vociferous reaction of opponents to legislators and journalists who simply canvass the options of gay marriage and parenting mean that conservative views appear to be prevailing in the debate. This has resulted in a somewhat paradoxical situation where conservatives, traditionally anti-sex, pro-marriage and pro-natalist, appear to be
advocating non-reproductive sex outside of marriage for one segment of the Australian population. It seems that queer Australians may bonk, but they may not breed.

(3280 words)

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Notes

1. In the context of this article, I have taken the term ‘homosexual’ to cover both gay men and lesbians, and the term ‘queer’ to describe families headed by lesbians and gay men.

2. Wong has been severely criticised by many in the LGBT communities for her performance in this discussion. Indeed, her statement about the views of the ‘vast majority of Australians’ is at best an overstatement, at worst deliberate obfuscation, given the polling figures to which she undoubtedly has access. However, it is worth observing that she does not enjoy the advantages that Entsch had; as the first openly gay cabinet minister, and a woman of Chinese ethnic background at that, Wong may feel that she cannot afford the accusations of ‘special pleading’ that her advocacy of
gay marriage would probably arouse, with all the media attention and hostility from conservative sections of the public which even Entsch had to endure.

3. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2003 (AuSSA) was the first in a biennial social survey series conducted by the Centre for Social Research at the Australian National University (ANU). For more information see:


References


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