

Firstly, we would like to thank the members of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission for asking us to present our personal story. We feel privileged to have this opportunity.

As this is our personal story, we have made a conscious decision to be guided by our written submission to the National Inquiry but this issue is one we think and talk about constantly and we have added some other comments which reflect the development in our thinking since we made our original submission.

We have been very fortunate to have been able to live together for the past 30 years in two countries; the UK and Australia; establishing lives together in each including treasured, supportive relationships with each others family and our own friends.

We recognise that in part this has been due to our **own resilience**; not letting the negatives get in the way and maintaining a very positive attitude.

When we were living in England and my 2 year working holiday visa was about to expire, I found a job with the Australian High Commission so I could stay and work in the UK, we bought a flat together and we built a really happy and productive life together and very active in making the most of one of the most exciting cities on earth for us.

At the same time however, we knew the stability of our life rested on the fact that I had this job at the High Commission which guaranteed my residency in the UK. We thought about a marriage of convenience to stabilise the situation but in the end, that was not for us and we continued on as we were.

During the 80s, the Australian Government started rationalising its embassies and High Commissions around the world and there was the very real threat

that I may be without a job at some time and hence with no rights to remain in the UK. At this time 1984 Henry applied to immigrate but because we were not married and I could not sponsor him, this was not possible (and the situation was the same for us in terms of UK Government policy as well). This situation was very uncertain as you can imagine.

After two years we then heard that the Australian Government of the day had implemented a very enlightened policy for that time.

By that we mean, the Australian Government allowed us to travel to Australia in 1986, allowed Henry to enter on a tourist visa and then allowed him to apply for residency and all the rights that brought, while in the country.

Looking at that from today's perspective what we did then seems almost laughable. We took the Australian Government on trust, left our home on the strength of a suggestion more than a promise and presented to the Immigration Officer at Sydney airport. At any time Henry could have been denied entry.

Would we be willing to do that today? Our estimation would have to be that with the sort of ignorant and discriminatory comments coming from Federal and State Government representatives and their pandering to a fundamentalist minority we certainly could not. We can have no real trust in many of this country's political representatives **and we would have to say that that is one of the most shameful differences that we feel when compared with the conditions for heterosexual couples.**

Back in the 80s the Australian Government did not let us down and we will never forget that; that however, is not the way we see it today.

The picture that Barry has painted doesn't sound too bad but of course what we had to do to remain together was not easy. **There were major economic and emotional costs and it is important that they are clearly stated:**

- I am the eldest son of a Liverpool family and when we decided to leave the UK, the family were very distressed., as culturally, I was an important and influential family member., and my permanent departure hurt them a great deal.
- We had to give up the home we had made together and a group of wonderful friends . We had to both resign our jobs which we enjoyed and face the prospect of starting over again in a "foreign" country.

All of this was very traumatic for us.

So despite our willingness to accept the possibility of living here in Australia, and being very thankful for that, there were major negative implications that we had to deal with daily. At this time we had to accept this because as a gay couple who wanted to stay together, **we had no choice and certainly not the choice of "marriage" which heterosexual couples have always had** and the rights that that automatically grants.

It is something we don't talk about very much but those first 5 years in Australia were very difficult. We know we were depressed and we know just how much of our strength it took to overcome that and move on. We know any person who immigrates can tell the same story but we think the situation is worse and harder to deal with when it is a choice that is forced on you rather than freely made.

In a way, participating in this inquiry has brought a lot of these feelings and emotions back to the surface, especially because of the ignorant comments we now have to listen to again and especially those coming from some so called "community leaders".

What also contributes to our anger is that other countries have moved so far ahead and we now find **we have come full circle:**

- As Australian citizens we are accepted but our relationship is not recognised as a fully legal partnership;
- "We live in a country which has a deliberately homophobic and shameful approach to same sex relations: not our words but those of Alistair Nicholson, former chief justice of the Family Court.
- As much as we want to contribute, we are deliberately excluded from the full rights of citizenship on the basis of prejudices from dysfunctional and fundamentalist members of society.

How can this be good for US or the Australian community?

For the first time ever we also have options:

- we can now return to the UK in a fully recognised same sex civil partnership, with
- Barry granted full rights as any other UK citizen.
- In fact we are on the verge of travelling to Melbourne to register our Civil Union under UK law. We want to do this, because we will have options in life that we never had before.

What we do with that we need to consider but we both feel so liberated by just having the opportunity. We can actually get a piece of paper that recognises

our relationship and establishes our rights in law: to travel and live together in the UK

Our views: What should happen from here!

Whether we think about the Commonwealth or State Governments, we are still waiting.

Same sex relationships must be recognised and respected but we still don't know when this will happen and what form it will take.

We have options now and expectations: we won't settle for less than all the same rights (and responsibilities for that matter) as other members of the community, homosexual or heterosexual.

What we dislike the most is the expectation that we should be thankful for any small crumbs that may drop from the table. Like Paul Keating, we don't intend to go back to the 50s or doff our caps for anyone; **what we expect is complete equality with other Australians.**