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ACON President 1985 - 1986

The formation of ACON in early 1985 was an important step in Australia's response to HIV/AIDS which had begun in early 1982. In those first three years much of the blueprint was laid down. The NH&MRC and the Blood Banks had reacted, the team at St Vincent's Hospital and the State Government had set up processes, and the gay community had set up the AIDS Action Committee and GCS (as it then was) took up the task that was to become Ankali.

The Prospective Study was launched with the help of the AAC, the first safe sex campaigns and leaflets were released, one by the State Government, one by the gay community, the first public information meeting was organised by the AAC at the Paddington Town Hall. Other community based organisations were established - the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation, the Community Support Network, People with HIV/AIDS. Liaison was established with Health Departments, State and Federal, relevant doctors and so on.

All of these initiatives drew on the skills, organisations and networks that had grown up over the preceding twelve years of gay and lesbian activism in Sydney and Australia. The epidemic also furthered the links between the political activists and the gay sub-culture or cultures. There had been something of a history of hostility there, but HIV did not recognise such boundaries.

The early challenge was simultaneously to get people to take HIV seriously, to respond to the safe sex messages, while calming the hysteria surrounding the epidemic. It was also to get accepted what some called 'the new public health', the peer group based model as opposed to the old model of quarantine and messages handed down from on high.

In this context, the so-called 'Queensland babies' story broke in the middle of the late 1984 federal election campaign. Neal Blewitt, Health Minister, acted rapidly to extend and formalise the government's response. This included establishing the medical AIDS Task Force and the community and education oriented NACAIDS, the National Committee on AIDS on which the AAC and its Victorian counterpart had representation. Further, the federal government, in recognition of the roles they had and would need to play, decided to fund gay community based organisations.

Initially funding was limited and the government decided it would deal with only one body in each State and Territory, not several competing ones. Within the gay community it had also become clear that greater communication and liaison was needed among ourselves. Thus it was that a meeting of the various groups was held in early 1985 and the decision taken to form ACON, with the affiliate structure that suited our needs.

Fortuitously, also in 1985, the NSW Government enacted the Associations Incorporation Act, which came into operation on 1 July 1985. This provided an appropriate legal structure for non-profit community organisations that had legal obligations such as leases, employees and the like. ACON was, it is believed, the first organisation in NSW to apply for such status.

Since those days, ACON has grown considerably and its emphasis has shifted more into service provision while education remains a high priority. The political advocacy role of earlier years, toward governments and the general community, is no longer as central, as necessary, as it initially was.

The extent to which Australia has been successful in containing the incidence of HIV/AIDS is perhaps the greatest achievement of the AAC and ACON, of the other community organisations, and of the politicians, doctors and bureaucrats who embraced the 'new public health model.'

It is also to be recognised that gay and no doubt lesbian politics in Sydney in the 1970s was a rather fractious beast, fraught with personal rivalries and dislikes and presumed ideological differences. These informed and to an extent affected especially the early years of the AAC and ACON. It is to the credit of many that we were able to grow out of much of that and become as professional as we are today.

For the record, I was also Co-convenor of the AAC, one of the two founding gay members of NACAIDS and the founding President of ACON and member of the Committee of ACON and convenor of its legal working group for some years.